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M E G.

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MRS. EILOART.

AUTHOR OF

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&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MEG.

CHAPTER I.

WILL SHE FIND WHAT SHE SEEKS?

ON arriving at Elma Place, Meg found a letter from Mr. Ensdell awaiting her, to inform her of his intention to return the next day. Like his other letters, it bore no address, so that Meg was still in ignorance of the place where the kinsman resided of whose illness he had occasionally spoken. She would not stay to see him. She felt instinctively that he would not comprehend the change which had passed over her, and would perhaps even ridicule the idea that it would be possible for her to find her way to

better things. She could not bear his ridicule; the cold, cynical tone in which she had sometimes heard him speak of men and things—once of his own brother—jarred upon her. She fancied just what he would say, and how he would look, if she told him why she had resolved to quit him, and she felt it would be needless torture to expose herself to such words and looks. So she would leave the next morning—but where should she go? It was by no means certain that Mrs. Mayne would find her employment as a model, and if she could get anything else to do, she would prefer it. She thought of her lace pillow; she knew that she worked far more quickly at it than Susan did, who had taught her, and lace like that fetched its price in the shops. But Susan had told her of girls who sat at their cottage doors in the country and made it. If she could only do that!—only fly far

away from this terrible London, that had been such a cruel nursing mother to her, and live in the sweet fresh air, amidst rural sights and sounds, and with people good, homely, and kind-hearted, such as she had read of, and who would know nothing of her story and its shame! She drew her breath with delight at the idea. It would be like a new life—almost a rehabilitation —to spend her days beneath some peaceful cottage roof, embowered in trees, and looking out on fresh green fields, far, far away from smoke, and noise, and foul sounds, and oaths. In time, it might be, she would forget that such things were, and her own unhappy knowledge of them. Why not?—what had she heard only that day of Christ, and a great Father, from the pure, sweet lips, whose kiss seemed to have purified her own? In the country she would have time and quietness to learn the meaning of those

words. She thought over them again and again, but she could not comprehend them as yet. If she could only see again the girl who had told her of possible peace and comfort. And why not? Did she not live in the country? She had heard her speaking of the hay-making, and the country harvest, the first time she saw her in Mr. Ensdell's studio, as if country occupations were familiar to her. It was possible that Mr. Ensdell might visit Summerly; but it would be worth the risk of coming in contact with him to live near that sweet presence. Let her once be free of his house—no longer dependent on him; and she could hold her own well enough, even if they did meet. But where was Summerly? Mr. Ensdell might be staying there now; but his letter told her nothing—only bearing the post-mark of the nearest market-town. How should she find her way there? She sat and thought for

a while, then remembered that Mr. Ensdell had once spoken of going there; and when the cab came to fetch him, she had heard it directed to King's Cross Station. Summerly must be reached by her starting from thence, and it could not be very far. She should have money enough to carry her there, and a few shillings left. She took out her purse and counted its contents.

Mr. Ensdell never gave her much money, preferring to pay her bills himself; but he was very liberal, and she had almost *carte blanche* to run those up as high as she pleased. She found she had not quite two sovereigns—it was little enough to begin the world with, but had she had more, I question whether she would have kept it. She sat maturing her plans till the servants had retired for the night; then she went into her own room, selected one more dress, almost

as plain as the one she wore, and a change of linen, and putting all together in one parcel, made another of her lace pillow. Then she locked up the different trinkets Mr. Ensdell had given her from time to time, and enclosed the keys in a small parcel directed to him. But before sealing it, she sat down and wrote. She could not leave him without a word; but it was far better that word should be written, therefore she wrote thus:—

"Mr. Ensdell.

"Sir,—This is to say good-bye, once and for all. I think we are better apart, and it is for me to go. For some time past my mind has been troubling me, and I have thought that I was not doing right in staying here. I began to feel like this when Mrs. Needham snatched her baby from me. I thought it very cruel then, but I don't blame her now. I see why she did it. I don't blame you; I don't ask you to

marry me. Even if you would, I don't see that that would make things right. Nothing in this world can ever make them right for me. I have gone wrong all my life—wrong for want of knowing better; but I have a little knowledge now, and if good women turn from me, or will not let me touch their children, it shall be only because they cannot forget that I can never be like one of them, let me try as I will; but not that I am still living in wickedness. That at least I can help, and come the worst to those who have had such a life as mine, death is not so very terrible. I can't bring myself to thank you for your kindness. It was cruel kindness, after all, done only to please yourself. You must have known what was right, even if you did not choose to do it; but as to me, what chance of good has ever been put in my way from the time I was in my cradle? All my life has been one long shame; but

do you think it would ever have been so if I had been half as wise as you? If I had only known!—I catch myself saying this every minute—if I were dying, I think those would be my last words; but I did *not* know, and you did. I was low enough —could you do nothing, with all your knowledge, but pull me down still lower?

"I did not mean to blame you. After all, have I any right? Only one thing I ask, if you ever meet me—and that shall not be if I can help it—take no notice—let me be as a stranger. I shall never trouble you again, be sure of that. I leave you nearly everything you ever gave me. I would not take what I have done but that I cannot help myself. After this, you may be sure that, were I starving, you would be the last from whom I would take a bit of bread. And so once more I say good-bye.

"MARGARET BLOUNT."

Then she enclosed this letter, with the keys, sealed and directed the packet, and placed it on the mantelpiece of the room below; and then, taking down her parcels, sat there still, quiet, and sleepless, waiting for the morning dawn.

Still and quiet to all outward seeming, but thinking, thinking, thinking—ever trying to find out the meaning of those precious words she had heard last night, and recalling again and again the pressure of those sweet, pure lips. The Father!—was there, then, one for her? Would He hear her, if she cried to Him? Would He pity her, as a child, in spite of all the sin and vileness of the past? Was it He that had taught this girl to love and comfort her—to press that kiss upon her lips, and to speak to her of Him and of the Christ? Oh! if she had only, only heard of Him in the years gone by, would she ever have been

what she was? But it was not too late to find Him even now, if only she could be told of the way. Not too late!—not too late!—she murmured it over and over to herself. There would be some quiet church in the country, where some good man, such as she had read of, would speak glad tidings every Sabbath day, and in the quiet hours, bending over her pillow, she would have time to think them over. She would not force herself upon the girl whose pitying words had been such comfort to her; it would be almost enough to love and worship her at a distance. Still—still, she might come near her, and speak again; and meanwhile, sometimes to hear her name, to catch the flutter of her robe, to watch her riding or driving by, would be enough. She had found a new idol, and was pouring out her soul before it; as pure as any of her Pagan heroines—but oh! how infinitely more

loveable and tender! Amidst all the shame and agony which the memory of the past still called forth, Meg felt something almost like to a faint semblance of happiness as she dwelt on Eleanor Stanton's face and words. She pictured the one, and dwelt on the other, till the morning light told her it was time to leave the house, and proceed towards the station.

She opened the street door softly, and closed it quietly behind her, and stepped out into the still hushed streets, and walked on quickly and firmly.

Had she taken the first step towards a better life? Would she find in the quiet country village what she sought? Would she emerge from her paganism to the peace and joy unspeakable? Would she be led to Christ's feet, and to the bosom of her Father? Or would she be left still in her doubts and darkness, while the Church was

settling how many candles should be burned upon its altars, and what flowers were fittest for each season of the year? It was Christianity this poor heathen wanted—what would the Church, with its rites and symbols, its incense and its vestments, do for her?

She was longing, yearning with all her heart and soul to be taught the way to follow in Christ's steps—the path to her Father's house. For all her sin-stained past, she was humble, willing, docile as a child, eager to learn, and ready to be taught. But where would be her teachers? Could the wants of such a soul be met by Mr. Marsh and his sisterhood? Could they understand its needs, and answer its requirements? Time would show, but it was well, perhaps, for Meg that as she bent her steps towards Summerly, she knew not to what she was hastening.

CHAPTER II.

AN ARCADIA OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

ABOUT half a mile from the Oaks, as a bird might fly over the green fields and copses that lay between the two, was Chalk Vale. It lay about a quarter of a mile from Summerly Common, and was as thickly inhabited—though by a very different population—as the aforesaid "picturesque and salubrious locality," to use the expression of the builder who had covered part of the common's fair surface with red brick and twisted chimneys. It was no vale, in spite of its name, being part of the long steep road that wound through Summerly and on to Milford. There were a number of cottages on

either side, thickly interspersed with beer shops. At one part the houses lay back from the road, and Jones the builder used to let his logs lie here till he wanted them; and this place was a favourite lounge, especially on Sundays, for all the roughs and idle boys of the neighbourhood. Chalk Vale had anything but a good name, though the people were really no worse than their neighbours; only there were more of them —and the poor do not gain by associating too exclusively together. Still, to a passer-by the place did not look unpromising. The cottages were tidy—some of them with little gardens—and here and there one with some claims to the picturesque. If you went down Chalk Vale when its inhabitants were at dinner, you would think it not a bad specimen of an English village. But to see it in all its glory you should visit it on summer evenings, when work was over, or,

above all, at any time on the Sunday. Then the men hung about the cottage doors, or gathered together about the logs, and joked and swore; and the boys played rude games, using words and jests than which no worse could well be uttered by any band of street Arabs in St. Giles's; and the wretched women toiled up the steep hill to fetch water from the spring by the roadside, or stood two and three together, gossiping over their neighbours' troubles, or recounting their own.

The girls who lived in Chalk Vale had a worse fame than any in the village, but really with little justice. They sinned and were shameless over it, but so did the girls in Beech Row, Chadwood Lane, or Bull's Hill; only in Chalk Vale more of them being together, more ugly little facts crept to light, and more "misfortunes" occurred than in any other part.

Towards the lower part of Chalk Vale a

narrow lane turned off, that led to a few cottages of rather a better stamp than even the best of those in the high road. In one of the largest of these, with a garden which was always well kept and bright from spring to autumn, with the varying flowers of the season, Mrs. Potts and her family were located. I say Mrs. Potts and family advisedly, though the family included a husband. But Mrs. Potts was the most active and prominent member of the household. Her husband did not, like most of his fellows in Chalk Vale, drink two-thirds of his wages away, and find fault with his wife for bad management in not being able to find fuel, food, rent, and clothes out of the rest; but he was a quiet man, as his wife often said of him, and a frequent invalid. He earned good wages, but he was so often out of work that Mrs. Potts had enough to do to make both ends meet, especially as her family was

large, and varying in age from eighteen years to eight months. Mrs. Potts was seldom without a baby—sometimes they lived, sometimes they died, but as one grew up or passed away, another was sure to come in its place—so that Mrs. Potts, to use her own words, "knew what it was to have her hands full as well as e'er a woman in the place!" She was quick-tempered and sharp-tongued to every one—children and all—but her husband, and to him she was both a tender wife and a good nurse. Let things be as hard as they might—and sometimes, when John Potts' fits of illness were of unusual length, they were very hard indeed—she took care that he should never have to bear their full brunt. The wolf came sometimes very near their door, but John Potts never heard its baying. She was a good manager, and looked well after her children, sent them to school regularly while little,

and to service as soon as old enough. Kept them tidy, too—it was wonderful how she did it, with her slender means, and the demands upon her time; but there are some women with whom both time and money seem elastic. Still, she was not a popular person with her neighbours, spoke her mind too freely when the girls went wrong, or the children were allowed to play on the logs instead of being sent to school; took the credit of her husband's sobriety too much to herself, intimating that "men were pretty well what their wives made them; John Potts was as good a husband as ever breathed, but there was no knowing what he might have been with one or two that she could name!" Neither was Mrs. Potts in the best of odour with the dwellers on Summerly Common. The sisterhood was formed, though its costume was still in abeyance, and with the sisterhood Mrs. Potts was

not popular. She could not take their ministrations meekly. She was civil after her own blunt fashion, but she could neither cringe nor curtsey. And she was not a good beggar. Let times be as hard as they might, she kept a good face to the world, and the children were trim and tidy, if there was nothing but potatoes and salt for their dinner, and a scant allowance of that. She would often have been glad of a little help, but she found, as long as the children were clean and trim, her neighbours, who appealed to the rags their boys and girls wore as evidence of the truth of their tales of distress, were better cared for. And Mrs. Potts was Low Church, too—perhaps more out of opposition than anything else, for it was seldom she found time to attend any place of worship at all; but as some of the leading members of the sisterhood had been sedulously endeavouring to indoctrinate her with their views, Mrs.

Potts had turned contumacious, and declared that when she did go to church at all, and "it wasn't more than half a dozen times a year she could find time for it, it should be where she understood something of what was going on; and not to a place where she was bothered and moidered with new-fangled ways that pestered plain folks out of their senses, and turned faint with smells that she couldn't abide, and deafened with singing till her head swam round!"

Potts was in Mr. Hubbard's employ, being, indeed, the chief man on the farm, and Mrs. Hubbard therefore considered it incumbent on her to look after the spiritual interests of his family. She lectured Mrs. Potts upon her defalcation from the church, but to little effect Mrs. Potts always had her answer ready in this case.

"She went herself, and sent the children where Potts told her. A woman

couldn't do better than mind her husband in such matters. He'd times for thinking that she hadn't, when he was too ill to do anything else, poor fellow,—and men had more brains than women, if only they'd make use of them, and she'd never driven Potts to muddle his away with beer, as some folks did that she could tell of."

And Mrs. Hubbard, whose ideas of wifely obedience were very different from those Mrs. Potts so meekly expressed, had to submit to Mr. Potts' right to manage the spiritual affairs of his family, as far as selecting whether they should go to St. Paul's or St. Mary's went, or stopping away altogether. She might do as she pleased with the maids, but to meddle with her husband's men was another matter. In his fields and barns, whatever he might be by his fireside, Mr. Hubbard was paramount. So Mr. Potts was allowed to exercise his au-

thority undisturbed by the interference of his mistress; which, perhaps, was a good thing, as had she interfered, he might, for the first time, have become aware that such an authority was vested in him.

Mrs. Potts' third daughter having followed the example of her sister, and gone to service, Mrs. Potts had thought she might as well take in a lodger, which she had not yet considered it advisable to do, with a girl of fifteen under her roof. There were always plenty of young men in Summerly glad of a single room; but Mrs. Potts had seen too much of the evils arising from such inmates, to take one in herself, till her elder girls had found homes elsewhere. But she put up a bill the day after Hannah had gone, and to her surprise found the announcement that there was "a room to let" answered by a young woman. A single young woman, she professed herself, anxious to have

a quiet home at a low rate, where she could follow her business of lace-making. Mrs. Potts was puzzled by the appearance of the applicant; she scarcely appeared to belong to the class who labour with their hands for their living; but there was the lace pillow, bobbins and all complete, as the young woman threw off its covering to show it to her; and there was eight shillings offered in advance, for four weeks' rent. Mrs. Potts would have preferred a young man, who would have been out all day, to a young woman, who wanted to stay at home and work; but still there might be drawbacks in having a young man in the house when the girls were out of place, and the eight shillings was very tempting. John Potts had been at home with the rheumatism the last week, and her funds were falling low, so the bargain was soon made, and Meg found herself installed in Mrs. Potts' back bed-room.

It was a small room with a sloping roof, lattice window, and no fireplace. A truckle bedstead in the corner, a wash-stand, two rush-bottomed chairs, and a rickety table comprised the furniture; but out of the window Meg could see the fields, with their hedgerows now whitening over with the hawthorn, stretching far and wide, while the cottage roofs and back gardens of Chalk Vale could be seen on one side, with the smoke from the chimneys winding up through the clear atmosphere. It seemed all so still, so peaceful, so homelike—so like what Meg had read and fancied of the country. The room, though poor and small, was clean, and the birds in the surrounding trees were twittering their songs, while there was a buoyancy and freshness about the atmosphere hitherto unknown to her. It was the country, she was away at last from the cruel streets, and the noise and wickedness of London

life. It was the country, where people had more pity on their fellows than the jostling crowds of London ever knew; where they had time to be good, and to learn good things. If she had only lived here all her life, how different that life would have been!

CHAPTER III.

NEW TROUBLES AND PERPLEXITIES.

MEG had worked hard at her pillow all the remainder of the week, sitting sometimes at her own window, looking over the fair green fields, of which she felt that she should never be weary, and sometimes in Mrs. Potts' back garden, while the younger children played about. Mrs. Potts had found, before two days were over, that Meg might be turned to other account than as a lodger. Still and quiet as she was, the children took wonderfully to her, and Meg appeared only too glad to be allowed to mind them while working at her pillow; so Mrs. Potts was able to proceed with her

washing and other domestic duties with an easier mind while her new inmate was looking after the little ones. Meg never went beyond the garden these few days—small as it was, and with only a few straggling wallflowers and roses for ornament—the rest of its space being devoted to cabbages and potatoes—it was a new world to her; the very weeds—and there were plenty of them—were objects of interest and wonder. She had quite enough these three days to occupy her mind and thoughts without venturing further. Once or twice she thought of Mr. Ensdell, and wondered if he felt very angry when he had her letter; but she dismissed him from her recollections as soon as possible. She had no right to reproach him perhaps, but she could not recur to him without anger, and anger seemed so out of place in this calm, country life—it was so much better to think of Miss Norton as she

had last seen her—or, above all, of Miss Stanton, as she had bent over her with pitying words and streaming eyes, and made her feel she was not so utterly an alien and outcast as she had thought herself. And on the Sunday she thought she would go to church—she had never been to a place of worship yet, but if she was to be good, and find her way to better things, she must go to church and learn of them. She said nothing of this to Mrs. Potts till the Sunday morning came, taking it for granted that that worthy matron would go, and perhaps allow her to accompany her. But after breakfast, which she always took in the same room which served the family as kitchen and sitting-room, Mrs. Potts proceeded about her domestic affairs much in the same way that she did every day, only perhaps in a more leisurely manner. There was no cleaning up to do, and no washing, and the Sun-

day's dinner would be but a meagre one, and would have been more meagre still had it not been for Meg's eight shillings. Mr. Potts was better, and intending to go to work the next day, so Mrs. Potts was in a cheerful frame of mind, which was evidenced by her scolding the children a little more briskly than usual; and as the youngest baby was a wonderfully old one for Mrs. Potts to have, being nearly two years, there was really very little reason why John Potts and she might not have gone to church together, and taken their children with them. But no such thought appeared to occur to either of them. John Potts took up the *Milford Observer*, for which he always paid a penny every Saturday evening, and sitting in his own cushioned arm-chair by the fireside, began to read it. Mrs. Potts washed up the breakfast things, and told the two younger children to go and play in the back garden;

and, after a time, called Bob and Bill to her to be washed for Sunday-school, telling them to be sure and come home straight from church when they left it, and not be giving one another black eyes on the way home, as they had done the preceding Sunday. It was very clear that she had no intention of coming home with them to overlook their behaviour.

The Sunday morning wash was a formidable affair. Mrs. Potts tucked Bob's head under her arm, and lathered and rubbed with a will, poking the flannel in eyes, mouth, nose, and every crevice and corner of Bob's face. Now and then Bob set up a faint protesting howl, but it was worse than useless, as his mouth was instantly filled with soap, as a caution, his mother told him, to keep quiet, and not be deaving her head with his nonsense. "Folks may say what they please," she added, turning to Meg,

"and to my mind some ladies seem to think poor folk was only sent into the world for them to preach to, but they shan't say I don't send my children clean. Keep still, Bob—I don't want to be a-wastin' the soap with sending it into your mouth. Now, Bill, I'm ready for you. Bob, go and put on your Sunday jacket; I sat up late last night a-mendin' it. Now, look sharp, or you'll be late else."

"Wish I hadn't got to go," grumbled Bob, a sturdy urchin of ten years. "I'd a sight sooner be scarin' crows, or pickin' up stones."

"I don't doubt you," said his mother—"anythin' but just what you're set to do. How would my dinner get on—not that it's much to-day to speak of—with you a-messin' about the place."

"I'll go play chuck-stone nigh the logs," suggested Bob, with a view to make matters agreeable.

"I'd like to catch you at it," retorted his mother. "Sunday-school's better nor that, anyhow. Bill, you're done; you're always a quiet lad—you don't take half the soap, nor half the time either, that Bob does, who's always opening his mouth and his eyes. Run off, both of you, an' put on your jackets, and come to me and I'll fix your collars."

"What do they learn at Sunday-school?" asked Meg.

"Well, nothing much to speak on, but it keeps 'em out of mischief. What should I do with two boys lollin' an' loungin' about the place all Sunday morning? And as to lettin' 'em play with that lot in Chalk Vale, I'd like to see myself at it. No, no; I'll do my best to keep my children decent and respectable, an' out of bad company, though it's hard enough in a place like this, where there's little that's good; so I send 'em off to

the Sunday-school; and if they'd only keep to the Catechiz and the Bible, and a little sensible talk, such as the children could understand, it would be well enough; but they're driving at all sorts of matters, that neither boys nor grown-up people either can make head nor tail on; it's all of a piece with the tomfoolery they're carrying on in the church, which is just enough to keep every person with a grain of sense out of it; but it don't do to say as much before children," said Mrs. Potts, with a sapient look. "One's glad of a place to send them to, Sunday mornings; and anyway, Sunday-schools, or church either, is better than playing hop-scotch by the logs in Chalk Vale."

Half Mrs. Potts' speech was unintelligible to Meg. She listened in vague bewilderment, trying to find out its meaning. Presently she said—"I—I thought of going to church myself."

"Quite right too," said Mrs. Potts, approvingly, "as you've got good clothes to go in. It's worth seeing, is St. Paul's, for once in a way, though, if you're like me, you'll find once is enough. I don't pretend to go at all myself—how can I, with Potts so often laid up, and a baby almost always in my arms; besides, with all their getting up and sitting down, their kneeling, and bobbing, and bending, and ducking, I find myself more tired than if I'd stayed at home a-mindin' twins. And I don't understand it either—never know when I'm doing right or wrong; an' I don't see that when the Lord hasn't thought fit to make a woman a fool, she's any call to go and look like one of her own accord. Now and then, when I feels low-like, and times is hard, and Potts' rheumatiz worse than ever, I just creep off to the chapel for a spell of an evening. But one's got to be quiet about that here. I've

a hard fight at times with Mrs. Hubbard and some of 'em about not going to church, but I don't know how things would be if it was known I went to chapel. It's precious little help from the clothing club, or the coal club either, I'd get at Christmas, and one's got to look at that with times so hard, and Potts so often laid by."

Meg felt more bewildered than ever. She did not, and could not understand Mrs. Potts, who continued: "But it's quite right you should go—maybe you'll like it well enough, after all. Folks isn't always of the same mind, or St. Paul's wouldn't be as full as it is. Go early, or you won't be in time to get a good place. It's almost as bad to be late at the play as to be late at St. Paul's. Bob and Bill can't stay to go with you, or they'll be late at school, but I'll put on my shawl myself, and go with you to the corner,

and from there it's straight up the road all the way."

Meg was soon ready, and Mrs. Potts, leaving her husband to mind the younger children, accompanied her to the end of the lane in which her house was situated, and a little way up Chalk Vale. It was a very different Sabbath scene from what Meg had pictured—resembling the Sunday mornings in Swamp Town, rather than those ideal days of rest and sanctity of which she had read descriptions. I need not again describe Chalk Vale—and mine, at least, is no ideal picture—but Meg, in spite of her early training, shuddered as she passed the groups of men lounging round the beershop doors, or loitering on the logs, and heard their coarse jests and words. She turned to Mrs. Potts. "Why don't they go to church? I thought every one did in the country."

One man, a tall, bony fellow, unwashed,

unkempt, and unshaved, but with some gleams of intelligence visible through the long-standing dirt and beard, burst in with a laugh: "Do you think that we're bigger fools here than in town, my young lady? And do you think it's the likes of us the parson wants? We can't put money in the plate he's for ever having sent round. And I reckon our singing wouldn't be quite to his mind. We don't understand him, and he don't understand us. I haven't been in a church since I was married, and I don't intend to go near one again till I'm buried, when I reckon they won't ask me whether I will or no."

Meg shrunk away from the man, and looked at Mrs. Potts, as if to ask her the meaning of his words.

"Don't be scared, girl," said the matron. "Joe Stevens isn't at all a bad fellow, but what's the use of expecting a man to go to

church, unless you give him something he can understand; and if you're able to make out what Mr. Marsh is a-driving at, it's more than any of us can. But it's all right a good-looking girl like you, with good clothes on your back, should go—I don't say a word against it. You're ten times better there than idling about at the door like Parfitt's girls, on the other side of the road. Look at them, the sluts!—one with a baby already, and the other expecting one soon! Well, well, some folks know how to bring girls up! I should like to see mine turning out like that! I always say it's with children as with everything else—as you make your bed, so you must lay on it; and Mrs. Parfitt's made hers after her own fashion!"

Meg looked at the girls pointed out. She had seen many such in Swamp Town—she had been one such herself—but she and her fellows there might have pleaded that for

them no church-bells ever pealed, no teacher sought to enrol them in his school. They had been simply out of the pale of civilization, as far as either religious or moral culture went, and, as a matter of course, the natural consequences had ensued. But the church-bells were ringing now, calling these girls to prayer, and they stood there, one holding her baby as coolly as if she had been a wedded mother, while the other, who was evidently in the condition Mrs. Potts alluded to, was laughing and talking to a couple of young men who were smoking at the next cottage door. Meg stood appalled. Was this what she had left Swamp Town for? Or, in spite of the church, and the contiguity of the cottages to the good houses which she had passed on her way to Chalk Vale, were these girls still in the darkness from which she was trying to find her way? She turned to Mrs. Potts. "Don't

they know? Has no one ever told them?"

"Bless you, yes!" replied Mrs. Potts. "Many's the time I've preached to 'em myself about stopping out at nights, and going off to dances and such like. I warrant I'd make my girls' ears tingle if I caught 'em at anything of the kind. But where's the good? Mrs. Parfitt's no notion of bringing up a family, and has let the girls do just as they like, and you see what comes of it. Know better!—of course they know better; but what's the good of knowing when there's no doing? But there, they're no worse than their neighbours! There's not a girl in the place scarcely, but my own, who's a right to turn up her nose at them."

Meg was mentally stunned. To sin in darkness and ignorance as she had done had seemed bad enough, but to sin wilfully, consciously against light and knowledge, was incomprehensible. This was the Arcadia of

which she had dreamed. This was the Paradise of innocence and purity where she had hoped to begin another life, and find forgetfulness for all the dreary past! And if this church to which she was hastening had done so little for those around her, what would it do for her? What should she hear from its teachings, of the pitying Father, and the gracious Christ of whom those sweet lips had spoken? It was all a maze and a whirl, she was more confused and perplexed than ever; but Mrs. Potts' voice roused her out of her reverie.

"You can't miss the church now, and I must be back home—Potts 'll be tired of minding the children else. Keep straight on, and you'll come to it; and if you see Bob and Bill coming home, just give an eye to them, that's a good girl. Tell Bob his father will be safe to larrup him if he catches him a-larrupin' his brother."

Then Mrs. Potts went back, and Meg went forward.

St. Paul's was a poor imitation of a poor thing. Let Mr. Marsh and his sisterhood do their best, it was impossible to carry out the services on the magnificent and imposing scale of the London churches. Still, they had their flowers, their intoning, their small processions, their banners, and their incense. They did their little best; but, in a modern chapel of ease, the very size of the place was against them. It had been built under the old Rector's supervision, and he was not learned in Church matters, so it was simply a neat brick edifice, with one small aisle, and a gallery for the Sunday-school children. It was very difficult to get up anything like a procession here, especially as [illegible]nce from the nave to the vestry-[illegible] only place the choristers could [illegible]robe and disrobe in, was so absurdly

small. But Mr. Marsh was a host in himself, and the ladies did their part admirably. The less said of the singing the better, the chief object the choristers had in view appearing to be to make the utmost noise possible. Good voices were difficult to obtain, and when enrolled, were apt to play truant from the choir. The young Hubbards were again absent to-day, one having a tooth-ache, and the other having hurt his foot. It was wonderful with what frequency such small ailments troubled them since they had joined the choir at St. Paul's. But with all these drawbacks, there was quite enough in the small ceremonials of St. Paul's to be sufficiently bewildering to such a novice as Meg. It was utterly incomprehensible to her. She had come there to pray, and how could she pray when the words were uttered in that sing-song? It was not disagreeable to her—Mr. Marsh really did

intone well—but it was so difficult to understand; and the kneelings and uprisings, the surging waves of the ladies' dresses, when they swept the floor with them, and the whole of Mr. Marsh's performances, were a source of wonder. The sermon was short, but incomprehensible. There was very much about the Church in it, still more of signs and symbolisms, one or two politely deferential allusions to "our Lord," but not a word of that Father of whom Meg had come longing to hear, and only those vague compliments to the Christ whom she was thirsting to be told of.

It was over at last. The congregation filed out in sober and decorous order, and the Sunday-school children came trooping down the stairs after a less decorous fashion. Bob and Bill, when out of sight of their teachers, ran home, racing one another the whole way, in a manner that brought a sharp

reproof upon them when Mrs. Potts saw their flushed and heated faces. And Meg stayed behind—stayed till the old pew-opener came and told her it was time to go, when she looked at him, and, with a troubled wonder in her tone, asked if it was all over? Could this be all? It seemed such a bitter, pitiful mockery of what she had come there yearning and hoping for. It was all a puzzle and a mystery. Why did people speak of the church as a place for prayer?—for good and holy thoughts and teachings, if this was all it gave? She had learned ten times more from one night at the play—which was far better worth going to. Mr. Marsh's vestments were very gorgeous, but the dresses at the Haymarket pleased her much better, and the singing seemed a very miserable affair after the concerts to which Mr. Ensdell had taken her. What did it all mean? Was Church only meant for the rich and cul-

tivated?—and not for the poor and ignorant like herself?

It seemed like it from what she had seen at Chalk Vale, and slowly and sadly she retraced her steps towards it. The beer-shops were open now, and the men were going to fetch the Sunday beer. The draggled-tailed women whom she had met carrying water were indoors now, and the bold-looking girls no longer stood at their doors. The place was a little quieter, in spite of the laughter and jests she heard from the beer-shops; but it was sadly unlike Meg's idea of a country village, with the Sabbath sunshine resting on it. She walked on, troubled and heavy-hearted, and arrived just in time to hear Mrs. Potts concluding her scolding of Bob and Bill.

Meg interposed in their behalf:

"I am so sorry," she began; "they ran out before me, or I would have seen to

them. Please don't scold them, Mrs. Potts, I suppose boys will run too fast when there's nobody to look after them."

"Can't tell me a word o' the sermon neither," said Mrs. Potts, "nor a bit o' what they learned in Sunday-school? What's the use of my taking the pains I do to wash them, and send them tidy, if that's all the good they get by going."

"*I* can," said Bill, who was eight years old, and considered a boy of promise by his family. "I know what Parson said, and teacher too."

"Well, let's hear," said his mother. "He's a wonderful memory, that boy," she added, turning to Meg.

"Parson's talk was all about Church, so was teacher's," said Bill. "Teacher says, says she, hold by the Church, whatever you does—there's no salitation out of it. Now, says she to Bill and me, and the rest of us,

can any of you tell me what that means; and I says, I don't know what salitation means, nor the rest; but I lay if I was set to do it, I'd hold by the Church door as hard as e'er a one, let Bill an' all the rest of 'em try altogether to pull me from it."

Mrs. Potts patted her son's head. "He's the clever one of the family," she said to Meg. "Well, Bill, do you remember anything more?"

Bill nodded. "Teacher heard us our Belief. 'Now,' says she, 'tell us what Communion means?—communion of sainteses.' I didn't know, nor Bob neither. 'Then,' says she, 'I'll explain it—Communion means meeting—meeting together. Now, you know what that means?' I didn't, nor Bob. Then she says, cross like, 'Meeting means to meet—meet—meet—don't you understand that?' And I says, 'I do when I gets it, teacher, but that's precious seldom when

father's out o' work; an' I don't believe there's anything but potatoes an' hard dumplings for dinner to-day.' "

"You're a good boy, Bill," said Mrs. Potts, approvingly; "an' always bring us home something from your school. You shall have sugar with your dumpling to-day. The 'taties is done, so we'll begin. Come, father, I've got a famous drop of broth for you."

The family drew round the table, and Meg went upstairs to her own room. She sat down and ate her solitary crust by the window. There were the fields as green as ever, and the stillness of the air was only broken by the birds' songs. It was all so sweet, so peaceful, so exactly what she had dreamed the country might be; but even here there was ignorance, and sin, and drunkenness, as ripe as in Swamp Town. And the Church, from whose services and teachings she had hoped so much, was the

cruellest disappointment of all. Were goodness and purity only for the rich?—was religion a mystery too high for the humble? And if so, why was it thought worth while to teach such as Bob and Bill Potts? And if it was worth while, why were not the children given something to learn that they could comprehend? The Sunday-school seemed as profitless to them as the Church to her. She could not understand it at all —the whole thing was a mystery, with which she could not grapple. She felt too weary and disheartened even to try.

"It's a hard world," said Meg, "and I wish I was well out of it. Oh! dear, if I had but died with Joe and baby!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MORNING CALL FROM MR. TWISS.

MR. ENSDELL was sitting alone in Elma Place the morning after Meg's visit to St. Paul's. He was in an extremely discontented and unpleasant frame of mind, and had been so since his return. He had read Meg's letter with a mixture of emotions, in which surprise certainly predominated. What did the girl mean by it all? Had she been visiting a conventicle, and so been brought to see the error of her ways? —or had any one thought fit to call on her and enlighten her with regard to them? There was no "cant" in the letter, so he dismissed the conventicle theory; and who

could have sufficient interest in Meg to behave with such impertinence to himself? Was it possible that his brother Arnold might have thought fit to turn missionary in Meg's behalf, and have brought her to see that her position in Elma Place was rather a questionable one? But Arnold would not have gone to work in that way—what he did, he did openly; and supposing he had thought it incumbent on him to interfere with his brother's arrangements, he would from the first have avowed his intention of doing so. Besides, though he was aware of the existence of the little *ménage*, he was ignorant of its locale, and if he had wished to ascertain where it was situated, would have preferred making the necessary inquiries of his brother. No, Arnold had nothing to do with this—the girl must have gone of her own accord, like a fool as she was, according to Mr. Ensdell, who judged other people

according to his own lights, and who was not in the habit of imputing any very exalted motives to the conduct of his fellow-creatures.

She might have gone off with some one else; but there was something in the tone of the letter that forbade that supposition. Even Mr. Ensdell could not picture its writer as leaving him to sink to a still lower level. She was a fool *pur et simple*—there was an end of it. He had turned her head by his system of development, and this was all he had got for his pains.

He flung his cigar in the fire as, for the fiftieth time since Meg's departure, he arrived at this conclusion, and then turned impatiently towards the door, as Bates announced that some one wished to see him. She did not say a gentleman, though she presented a card, on which was neatly written, "Mr. Frederick Twiss," and she had

left that worthy in the hall with rather an uncomfortable feeling, as Mr. Ensdell's great-coat was hanging up in it.

"Twiss!—Twiss!" Mr. Ensdell was puzzled; the name was strange, and yet he had met with it before. Then he remembered it as the signature appended to the letter he had received when Mrs. Blount was ill, to inform him that Meg was obliged to discontinue her attendance in his studio. Possibly Mr. Twiss might now have come from her. Meg might be weary already of playing La Vallière repentant, and be seeking her Louis instead of waiting to be sought. The idea was a flattering one, and with great alacrity Mr. Ensdell bade Bates show Mr. Twiss in to him.

Things had been going rather hardly lately with that gentleman. He had been a month out of prison without a single chance, to use his own expression, of turning an

honest penny. Then it occurred to him to try if he could not prevail on his former pupil to give him a little assistance; he might work on her pity or her gratitude, or induce her to believe that, with the help of the papers of which he had possessed himself, she might secure a position which would induce Mr. Ensdell to render their present connection a permanent and more satisfactory one. In any case, whether any good came to her or not, Mr. Twiss thought some certain benefit must accrue to him, and the present state of his finances rendered a little temporary help very desirable. He had been much disappointed on hearing that Meg had left the house for some days, while Mrs. Bates sourly disclaimed all knowledge of her movements; but as the aroma of Mr. Ensdell's cigar reached him as he stood at the street door, he suddenly determined to see that gentleman, and ascertain, if possi-

ble, where Meg had gone to; and by working matters carefully, it might possibly be that some pecuniary assistance might be obtained from him.

Mr. Twiss was shabbier than ever; he had inked the seams of his coat very carefully, but still the white would show, and his hat looked forlorn and napless, in spite of all the brushing he had bestowed upon it. He only wore one glove—the other was too hopelessly gone ever to be pulled on, but he carried the stick that bore the remains of a tassel, and entered Mr. Ensdell's room with something of a jaunty and self-confident air. Then he dashed into conversation with the air of a man of the world, who feels that he is broaching a delicate subject, and wishes to make as light of it as possible.

"My young friend—*our* young friend may I not say?—is away from home at pre-

sent. May I ask if her absence is likely to be long? I had something of rather an important nature to communicate—something which from the—shall I call it interest, my dear sir, you have always felt in her, might possibly concern you?"

Then Mr. Twiss rubbed his hands together, and looked at Mr. Ensdell, who, on his side, felt considerably disconcerted by the fact that, instead of Mr. Twiss having come to give him information respecting Meg, he appeared rather to have come to seek it. It was an awkward thing, and not a pleasant one for his vanity, to have to own that she had run away from him without even letting him know where he would find her, if he felt disposed to fetch her back. Mr. Twiss misconstrued his hesitation.

"I have not been able to call before—various circumstances, into which I need not enter, having prevented me"—it certainly

He looked at a certificate duly signed, and witnessed—the contracting parties being Mary Blount and Stephen Ainslie. The marriage dated back twenty years ago, and had taken place at a parish church in the neigbourhood of London.

"Have you examined the registers of St. Jude's?" he asked, looking intently at the name of Stephen Ainslie.

"Some time since, and the register fully bears out the certificate; but, notwithstanding, it is quite possible Mr. Stephen Ainslie, even at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony, did not consider himself a married man, and, as far as Mary Blount was concerned, had not the slightest intention of becoming so?"

Mr. Ensdell looked inquiringly. "You don't mean to say he was married already? He might be a rogue, but scarcely a fool!"

Mr. Twiss placed another paper in Mr.

Ensdell's hands. It was almost a duplicate of the first, being also a marriage certificate, but the name of the bridegroom and the church were different. It was also dated a year sooner. The bride's name, too, was Mary Grey, instead of Mary Blount.

"Mrs. Blount lost no time in consoling herself by a second husband for the loss of her first," remarked Mr. Ensdell.

"She had her reasons, sir—she had her reasons! He beat and ill-used her, associated with loose companions, and then, to use a pardonable euphemism, left his country for his country's good. Mrs. Blount, if I gather rightly from various confidences made me at different times, imagined that in such a case the law allowed her to contract another marriage, without waiting for death to dissolve the first. Not an unusual mistake with women of her class. And Mr. Ainslie—well, she must have been a fine woman in

her time—we must not be too hard upon Mr. Ainslie for not disabusing her of the idea at first; but I think it was a pity that he did so at all—he might have had family reasons for it—still, it was treating Mrs. Blount a little hardly to send her from him, with a child three months old, telling her she had no legal claim upon him, and just giving her some small sum of money as a salve to his conscience. Mr. Ainslie was a little mistaken in the matter—just a little, as, if he is living yet, which I hope and trust he is, we shall find it an easy matter to prove. If not, we must do our best to bring the case home to those who think themselves his heirs."

"I can see no object likely to be attained by your doing so," observed Mr. Ensdell. "Mrs. Blount could scarcely be legally married to two parties at the same time."

"Have the goodness to read this letter,

and observe the date, and it will show you that Mrs. Blount was a veritable widow at the time she contracted her second marriage. I imagine that this letter did not reach her as soon as it should have done—not, in fact, till she had left Mr. Ainslie, believing herself not to be his wife. She was an ignorant woman, possibly not aware how best to assert her claims, or might have cared too little for him to think it worth while to do so. But this letter, written by the ship's surgeon, at John Blount's request, speaks of his death as having occurred just two days before the date of his wife's second marriage. It will not be at all a difficult thing to prove the authenticity of this letter. It is by no means impossible that Mr. Rollins, the surgeon, may be living yet. My time is pretty well taken up, but I think I could devote a little to the search, and my interest in Miss Blount would induce me to be satisfied with

the affair—Miss Blount herself is missing. There is no occasion for alarm, but she has perhaps been a little over-sensitive and scrupulous. It is possible that from some quarter she may have received a little annoyance, which has made her pride take alarm. However, we won't waste time in discussing the reasons for her departure now. She is gone, and I should hold myself indebted to any one who will tell me of her whereabouts. Personally, that is far more interesting to me than the question whether any particular ship's surgeon is alive or not. It will be worth while ascertaining that fact at some future time; at present my anxieties are centered in Miss Blount—not in her heiress-ship."

He gave Mr. Twiss particulars as to the date of Meg's absence, and all that he himself knew of her preparations for flight and means of subsistence; then slipping into the

hand which had the glove a retainer considerably exceeding what that gentleman had expected on account of his services in the matter of the ship's surgeon, wished him good day, and, taking up another cigar, returned to the fireplace and his meditations. They were not altogether pleasant ones. If he had only married Meg—done what would have appeared at the time the most Quixotic thing possible, how different matters might have been!

"Virtue would have been its own reward," he soliloquised; "but who the devil could have foreseen that it would? I must find the girl, and do my best to mend matters now. It's a deuced lucky thing Stanton changed his name when he turned respectable. It will keep this fellow a little longer off the scent, and give me so much more time to ascertain if Mademoiselle Marguerite is really my cousin, some degrees

removed. I wonder, can old Stanton be brought to acknowledge her? Will it make any difference in the property? I forget whether it's settled on his heirs lawfully begotten or not. A devilish unlucky thing for Miss Nelly if it is, and a devilish good thing for her newly-found sister—and the fellow that marries her. Now, if I'd only known of this a week ago, I might have pacified Miss Margaret's scruples, and gone in for the reversion of the Oaks. It mayn't be too late now; let me only find the girl, and make sure of her legitimacy. I don't know but what I'm bound to marry her, whether she's entitled to become Stanton's heiress or not! One's cousin *is* one's cousin after all—that is, if she's really legitimate, which does not appear altogether improbable. Let this fellow only hunt her up, and I'll be hanged if I don't feel fool

enough to take my chance of the cousinship's turning out a sell."

He paced up and down the room, turning matters over; then he stopped short. "I believe there's something in it after all. The blood and breeding in that girl never came from Swamp Town! I'll go and see Sales; make a clean breast of the whole affair, and ask him what he thinks of it. I should like to see the entry myself at St. Jude's. I could swear to Stanton's handwriting, and if I find it in the register, I shall think my good cousin a greater fool than I gave him credit for. The whole thing then, I suspect, will just turn upon the fact whether or not Mr. Blount was obliging enough to die in time to legalize his wife's second marriage. What a very unpleasant thing it may be for old Stanton if he did!"

CHAPTER V.

A MEETING IN THE COPSE.

MARY NORTON was installed at the Oaks within two days after her interview with Eleanor Stanton. The common sympathy the two girls felt for Meg, had drawn them together at once. Nelly was glad of a companion of her own age, to whom she could chatter on the subjects nearest her heart—on all subjects but one, at least—she had her own little secret respecting Arnold Ensdell; but it was very pleasant to have some one to whom she could talk of her anxieties about her father, and her trouble with Mrs. Winthrop, who could never be brought to take proper care of her-

self. There was Mrs. Vernon, too, to tell her of, and the Rector, and the innovations Mr. Marsh had brought into the parish, and that never-to-be-forgotten disappointment about the sisterhood which had promised so much and produced so little. She rubbed Mary's colours, and ransacked the garden and green-house for suitable subjects for her brush, and looked on critically while she arranged them. She was very lavish in her praises, and full of admiration for Mary's talents. On the whole, that young lady was having, as Mrs. Mayne had told her she would have, a good time; for Mr. Stanton was pleased to show some interest both in her work and herself, and to favour her with compliments as well as advice. The compliments were encouraging, and the advice, at any rate, did no harm, as Mary Norton pleased herself about following it. Mr. Stanton had himself wheeled into the

little octagon room, and looked on while Mary worked for an hour or so; then, fatigued by the exertion, he retired to his own apartment, where Mary generally spent the evening. Father Vivian was a frequent guest there. He played chess well, and was an amusing talker. Mr. Stanton piqued himself upon his liberality in religious matters, and liked the Father all the better because he gave him an opportunity of evincing it. Mr. Marsh called often, but his visits were generally paid in the morning, when Father Vivian was occupied elsewhere. Mr. Marsh felt himself but a secondary person in the Father's presence; there was no fraternising between them, as Mr. Marsh had hoped would be the case; the Father was not disposed to be fraternal, treating Mr. Marsh, as he had done all along, with a good-humoured assumption of superiority, that put anything

of that kind out of the question. But Mr. Marsh had another motive for making his visits in the morning. Nelly was then generally occupied with her father, who, after two or three interviews with the Curate, had given up the task of receiving him as a needless infliction, which might very well be imposed on Mrs. Winthrop. If Marsh only came to know how he was, Mrs. Winthrop could tell him, and hear what he had to say. The telling and hearing were apt to take a long time—Mr. Stanton's ailments must have been very numerous, or Mr. Marsh's condolences very lengthy. Mary Norton had not been in the house a week before she drew her own conclusions and (in confidence) communicated them to Nelly.

"Mr. Marsh is very high, but he don't go in for celibacy, or fasting either, does he? Some of them do, but I don't think Mr.

Marsh is of that sort. He looks to me quite capable of appreciating a good wife as well as a good cook. I'm sure he don't stop so long of a morning for nothing."

"I don't believe there's anything in it," said Nelly, gravely—"I'm sure I hope not, for Mrs. Winthrop's sake. Whatever would she do as a clergyman's wife? That's the worst, you see, Mary, of having too much on one's hands. I can't possibly be looking after her while I'm with papa, and I never *did* know anyone so helplessly incapable of taking care of themselves as Mrs. Winthrop. If Mr. Marsh makes up his mind to marry her—and really, now I come to think of it, it's not unlikely—how am I to prevent it? She's got a little money, you know—at least, if you don't, I've no doubt Mr. Marsh does; and if I'm out of the way—and I can't always be in it, with poor papa taking up so much of my time—he'll make her say

yes, just because she really won't know how to say no."

Nelly looked ruefully at Mary. It was clear that the burthen of her responsibilities sometimes weighed too heavily on her, and her fears were not altogether without foundation in the present instance. Mrs. Winthrop was in possession of a small income of her own when she accepted Mr. Stanton's offer to become the *chaperon* of his daughter. Since that time her income had been trebled by the decision of a Chancery suit in her favour, which her late husband had commenced. She was, on the whole, so well provided for, that it would have been needless for her to retain her situation under Mr. Stanton's roof, but that she shrank from the exertion involved in leaving it; besides, she had a vague presentiment that she should get on badly without Nelly—it was such a natural thing

for Mrs. Winthrop to be taken charge of by other people, but she had never met with any one who performed that duty as pleasantly as Miss Stanton. She shuddered as she thought of her possible fate, if she fell into Mrs. Orley's hands; and Cordelia had been very pressing lately in her invitations to her to take up her quarters at Summerly Cottage, and join the sisterhood. If she once left the Oaks, she had terrible misgivings that Cordelia would take possession of her and her belongings, and in some mysterious way confiscate them both to the service of the Church—she might even marry her to Mr. Marsh; and though Mrs. Winthrop received that gentleman with the same polite placidness she showed to everyone else, she felt a trembling horror pervade her whole frame when she contemplated the possibility of becoming his wife, and she was as well aware as Nelly Stanton

that if he proposed, and chose to be accepted, it would be quite out of her power to say no.

She was a bird looking with dread and awe at the fatal eyes of the snake who meant it for his prey. The bird was middle-aged, sober-plumed, and dull of song—the snake was tan-coloured and unpleasing; but not the less the bird was likely to be a helpless victim, and the snake to secure his prey. The bird might be unlovely and plain—no fit subject for romance; but the coming catastrophe was by no means a pleasant one to look forward to. After all, did it not deserve pity as much as if it were the brightest winged that ever flew? All the more pity that it was likely to be ensnared by such a poor specimen of a snake?

The girls were in the octagon-room when Mary had started the subject which had set Nelly's thoughts wandering into something

like this train. The painting was progressing rapidly while they talked. Mary had been hard at work for the last two hours, but she now laid down her brush.

"I *must* have another fern—no—none of those in the greenhouse will suit. The common ones that grow in the woods are better for my purpose. Could I run out for half an hour and look for one?"

"I'll come too," replied Nelly. "Mrs. Winthrop is with papa, reading him to sleep. Her reading always has that effect, somehow, on most people. I don't think he'll miss me, if we only go as far as the copse. I shall be back, if we're quick, before he wakes?"

"The copse" was a little nook, a few minutes' walk from the Oaks. It had been part of a wood in former times, and a few large forest trees still remained. There was a thick undergrowth of brambles, amidst

which violets nestled and ferns flourished. Nelly knew the copse well. It had been a favourite haunt of hers from a child; but she had had to discontinue her visits to it when Mrs. Winthrop took up her abode at the Oaks; that lady, the first time she had been taken there, standing in utter helplessness, held fast by an intrusive bramble, and looking, when released by Nelly, so fearfully afraid of venturing a step further, so utterly unable to defend herself from aggressive briers and intrusive thorns, that Nelly, in sheer compassion, was obliged to lead her out almost as if she were a child, and promise she would not venture there again. There was no fear of anything of this kind with Mary Norton. The delight of gathering herself the flowers she wished to paint, instead of going to Covent Garden to purchase them—the searching for her own bits of mossy stone and bark, would have been

recompense enough for far greater fatigue than any Miss Stanton was likely to inflict upon her. She had provided herself with trowel and basket—there were so many treasures of creeping ivy and velvet-piled moss in the copse, besides the ferns of which she was in quest; and the two girls walked briskly on, more relieved than either would care to own to the other, at escaping from the gloomy stateliness of the house, and the contiguity of Mrs. Winthrop and Mr. Stanton.

Mary stopped to gather a spray of hawthorn. What was it, as she did so, that made her thoughts revert to the girl who but a fortnight back had offered her flowers, and had her gift rejected?

"I wish I had not done it," she said, half aloud.

Nelly turned and looked inquiringly. She had a whole branch of hawthorn, one mass of bloom and fragrance, in her hand. Mary

saw the look, and answered the unspoken question.

"Not refused the flowers that poor girl offered me. Perhaps it was for the best, though, after all. It may have helped to open her eyes. Oh! dear, to think that such eyes should need an opening!"

She had told Nelly over and over again of her first acquaintance with Meg, and the whole sad story as far as she knew it. Nelly and she had wept and pondered over it together. Why should such things be? Why should such a girl have been left in sin and ignorance, in a land where schools and churches abounded? They were ill able to grapple with the social problem that has perplexed many a wiser head than theirs; and turning now from its discussion, they contented themselves with speculating on Meg's probable fate. They could not, would not believe that when, after covering Miss Stanton's

hands with tears and kisses, and gasping forth her incoherent thanks, she had torn herself away, as if ashamed of the emotion she had betrayed, it was to return to a life of sin. Anything but that! A leap into the dark river, a poisoned sleep that would know no waking, they could credit her with, sooner than that she should have lapsed again into the sin whose true nature she had learnt at length. That wild, despairing cry, "If I had only known!" seemed to ring in their ears again whenever they spoke of her. They were good girls, both, with imaginations singularly pure and innocent for girls of the present day, and it was impossible for them to realize the life through which Meg had passed, and which filled her soul with such unutterable loathing. They could only form a dim, vague, shuddering conception of it. It was very awful—too dreadful to be spoken of above a whisper—but she had

left it far behind her now. If she would only have let them help her to something better!

They were soon at a gate which they must pass before they could reach the copse. It was five-barred, and locked, but that was of little importance, as Mrs. Winthrop was not with them. It was easily surmounted, and after passing through a field with more horned cattle in it than Mrs. Winthrop would have encountered for any consideration, they found themselves in the copse. On either side the narrow, winding path grew clumps of brambles, and roots of trees whose trunks had long since been cut down. Ferns there were plenty for the gathering; wild hyacinths, too, in countless numbers. Mary had quite an *embarras de richesses;* the only question was of which to possess herself, and which to give up, because neither she nor Nelly could possibly carry away all that was worth the

carrying. Now it was one long branch of the wild-rose, rich with delicate leaves and tender buds; then a creeping tendril of small ground ivy; next a whole handful of hyacinths; then a thick tuft of moss, soft and velvety as a cushion; next quite a sheaf of fanlike ferns, and then one bit after another of rugged bark from the old trunks. Baskets and arms were quite full, and the girls sat down on the ground to arrange their treasures, with a view to their safe carriage home. For awhile the eagerness of acquisition had caused them to forget Meg and her sad story, and they laughed and chatted almost as merrily as two children might have done. After all, they were little better, though one was eighteen, and the other twenty-two. Mary Norton's love of Art had kept her younger than her years in many things that girls are apt to be proficients in betimes; while Nelly's guarded life and country train-

ing had left her as fresh and unspoiled as the wild flowers with which her lap was now full. They were both as happy in the enjoyment of the present hour as the butterflies which were flitting round them, or the birds that were twittering above. So happy, that their laughter and prattle sounded strangely in the ear of the one who sat a little way apart, and, unseen by them, was looking on and hearing every happy word, every peal of merriment!

Meg had come to the copse that morning, bringing her lace pillow beneath her shawl. It was only a little further from Mrs. Potts' cottage than it was from the Oaks; and though the pillow was heavy, it was worth an effort to bring it and work there. The copse had infinitely more attractions for Meg than even for Mary Norton. The country, the real wild sylvan country, with its wealth of flowers and depths of greennesses, was

known to her only by description. The fields to which she had sometimes wandered with her baby were too near town, too much trodden by other feet, too redolent of brick-making and tea-gardens, to have given her anything but the dimmest foretaste possible of what the country, with pastures and corn-fields stretching far away into the blue distance, would be. She gathered the hawthorn with a greedy delight—it was so beautiful to sight and smell; and she pulled the wild hyacinths, and looked at their beauty with a strange wonder. To think that anywhere in the world such treasures of loveliness could be had for the gathering, and yet till now that she should have known nothing of them! Swamp Town, with its baked air, foul smells, and all-pervading dust, and the fields with their golden glory of buttercups shining in the sun, their hedges fragrant and beautiful with hawthorn blossom,

and, above all, this copse, with the blue sky peering down through the leaves of the trees, the busy, happy hum of bird and insect life, and the all-delicious sense of seclusion, rest, and peace, pervading it: to think that the same earth could hold them both! And then Meg gave a sigh, as she recollected that, beautiful as the country was, with its fields, and trees, and flowers, it had not given her all she had looked for, and that there was more in common between it and Swamp Town than she had dreamed.

These thoughts were occupying her, when the voices of Mary Norton and Nelly Stanton struck on her ear. She was only separated from them by a clump of brambles, and a small space where the fern grew thick and rampant. How happy they looked, and how different from the girls she had known in Swamp Town! How different from herself, too! It was not their dress; Meg at the pre-

sent moment was as well attired as either; and it was not the refinement of look, or speech, or manner. Meg, in these matters, nearly rivalled them. No, it was not these things that made the difference—the great, the irremediable difference between them—Meg felt it was not these. They had forgotten her, apparently—they had been very kind to her, but what was she that they should remember her still? Not the less it was good to sit there and hear their happy voices and musical laughter. It was well that there should be happiness and sinlessness in the world, though neither had ever been or could be for her.

After a while Nelly rose. "I'm afraid we must go home. Papa may be missing me."

She caught sight of Meg's face as she spoke. Meg's face turned anxiously and wistfully towards her. In another moment she was at her side with extended hand,

which Meg was afraid to take; but it was something, nevertheless, to have it offered. Mary Norton came up too. The two girls felt intuitively that they had been right. Meg had left her past behind, and flown away from old associations, to re-commence a new life. They glanced at each other in a triumph of congratulations. But what should they say to Meg? How should they congratulate her? They were very feminine, and her dainty handiwork gave them something to talk of at once.

"I am so glad—I am so glad to see you here!" murmured Nelly; "and do you really make this beautiful lace? It is so lovely, Mary, isn't it?"

Mary Norton praised the lace as much, perhaps even more, than it deserved; and Meg said timidly, "I am glad you think I do it well; I—I thought it would be better to leave London, and to work at this, than

to stay there and get my living as a model."

"I think it is very much better," said Mary Norton gently. "And this lace is very beautiful. You ought to have no trouble in disposing of it. And it is so much better every way for you to live in the country than in London."

Nelly had been examining the lace. "Would you make some for me?" she said softly. She so wished to help, but was so anxious to do it tenderly and delicately. "I have a dear friend—you can't think how kind and good she is. I should so like to give her a couple of lace caps of your making; and I think it would please her if she thought that you had worked at them in the open air, with all the pleasant country sights and sounds around you. She is confined to her own room herself—will never leave it all her life. Isn't it pitiful? And it seems so pleasant to be able to give her

just a little pleasure. This beautiful lace would be just what she would like. Will you let me have some of your work for her?"

Meg's eyes grew bright. It was not the securing a customer, though it was time that she obtained one—but it was to be asked to work for one to whom her work would give pleasure; and to be told that it was beautiful by the one whose praise she had learned to set an inexpressible value upon, was more delight than she had ever hoped for. Mary Norton interposed with some practical suggestions; and then Meg promised to begin the caps the very next day, and work at nothing else till they were finished.

"I should like to come and see how you get on with them, if you will let me," said Nelly timidly. "I don't often stir from home further than this—papa is ill, and can-

not spare me—but some day, if he will let me, I will come to you."

"Mine is a poor place now," said Meg; and she described the *locale* of the habitation; "but," she added, "I should be very glad to see you in it."

"Then I'll come," said Nelly, "as soon as papa can spare me, and Mrs. Winthrop can walk so far. I'll come, you may be sure of that."

And then Nelly had to hurry away. It was quite time to return to Mr. Stanton; and with a few more kind words from both Mary Norton and her, they went on, leaving Meg scarcely able to realize her own happiness at the joy that had befallen her.

She drew a deep breath of intense delight. Nelly was so beautiful, so good —that was the crowning charm, so *good*— so fair to look upon, so sweet to listen to, and she had not only not despised her, but

been kind, and gracious, and sympathising. A glove lay on the grass—a light grey kid. Meg had noticed Miss Stanton holding the fellow to it in her hand; she took it up, and pressed it to her lips. "She would spare me this, I know—I'll keep it for her sake—I'll keep it all my life, let it be as long as it may!"

And it did not seem so dreary a thing to Meg for life to be long as it had done a few days ago, after her first attendance on Mr. Marsh's ministrations.

The day came when that glove was restored to Nelly Stanton, and she learned how much she had purchased with the kiss which she had given in the studio.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. SALES IN HIS CHAMBERS.

MR. SALES lived high up—very high up indeed—in the Temple. The rooms were pleasant, as far as the look-out was concerned, when you did get to them, but it was a serious undertaking to do so. Neither was the interior a particularly inviting one. The furniture was of the oldest, the carpet so worn as to be scarcely safe to tread on, forming in some parts a series of traps for the unwary. The laundress did her ministrations grudgingly, a thick layer of dust being generally deposited on the side-tables, and all the chairs but the one Mr. Sales himself occupied; while pleasant

as the view from the windows might be over the Temple Gardens, and on to the river, it was impossible to see anything of it unless the window happened to be open, owing to the thick coating of dirt and cobwebs with which they were invariably covered.

Mr. Sales had occupied these chambers twenty years, entering them of a morning at half-past nine, and invariably leaving them at five. His retaining them at all was a fiction, and not altogether a harmless one, inasmuch as the thirty pounds a year he paid for their occupancy might have been disbursed with considerable advantage as part of his household expenditure. He might have had clients once, but it must have been long ago, and they had never been numerous. Things had never prospered with him—like Arnold Ensdell, he had been an unsuccessful man all his life, and,

unlike Arnold Ensdell, had become soured and embittered in consequence.

He had a small income, on which he kept a small establishment at Clapham, leaving it every morning for the Temple, where his principal occupation was reading the *Standard*, which gave him, as far as quantity went, a wonderful pennyworth, and looking moodily out of the open window in summer, and more moodily into the fire in winter. It was a dreary, aimless life. Mr. Sales had had a great disappointment nineteen years ago, and had not yet forgiven Providence for inflicting it upon him. He could not punish Providence, so he punished himself, taking a gloomy pleasure in being as morose and misanthropical, as if his being so was of the slightest importance to any one in the world but Mr. Sales. Even his wife was not affected by it. She was a placid, easy woman, with a soul amply satisfied with the

small events of her daily life, and she spoke of "Mr. Sales' way" as if it was only a matter of course that that way should be a decidedly disagreeable one. She had known nothing of his disappointment—it had occurred before Mr. Sales had married her. His doing so, indeed, had been one of the small revenges he had taken upon Providence for having, as he thought, ill-used him, and he married a woman beneath him in every way, because the one he would have chosen was transferred with her fortune to another person. He could have borne the lady's not marrying him, if only she would not have married anyone else. Had she died single and intestate, her fortune must have reverted to him as her next of kin. As it was, she had been bestowed by a family arrangement, in which the only part she took was one of meek acquiescence, upon Mr. Stephen Gervase Ainslie, who, on his marriage, took the

name of his uncle who had been instrumental in arranging the marriage, and in due time succeeded to the Oaks; and when left a widower, remained in the enjoyment of the interest arising from the twenty thousand pounds, which had been settled upon his wife and the children of her marriage.

And if the lady had only married Mr. Lawrence Sales, he might have been a widower, too—but a widower with eight hundred a year as a very solid compensation for his loss. And if she had not married at all, the chances were twenty to one Mr. Sales would have inherited her fortune as a matter of course. There was the grievance. As she was to die so early, why couldn't she have kept single? Or, if she must marry, why couldn't she have married her cousin, and kept the money in the family? Mr. Sales was an ill-used man, and was never weary of revenging his wrongs upon himself,

as there was no one else upon whom he could conveniently do so.

Mr. Stanton on his marriage had held the right hand of fellowship out to Mr. Sales. Having settled and sobered down, it was part of his new *rôle* to be on friendly terms with his wife's family, as well as his own. Now and then Mr. Sales had accepted the invitations so freely offered him—it was part of the punishment due to himself for his ill-luck to witness his rival's better fortune. At the Oaks he had met Mr. George Ensdell, and between the two a kind of camerage had sprung up, dissimilar as they were in many respects. Mr. Ensdell knew something and guessed the rest of Lawrence Sales' story, and pitied the "poor devil" whom his cousin had ousted. And the other did not mind being pitied by Mr. Ensdell, who was liberal in other things than pity, and was generally ready

to lend a five or ten-pound note without reminding the borrower that there were several similar loans still unpaid. Once in a way, Mr. Sales would pay a small instalment of his debts; but if either he or Mr. Ensdell had reckoned matters up, which they never did, it would have been found that there was a considerable balance due to the latter. Occasionally Mr. Ensdell would ask Lawrence Sales' advice upon some technical point connected with his property—once or twice he had really been of service to him in this way, and perhaps this might be considered as some set-off. At any rate, the pecuniary relations between the two parties never appeared to operate unpleasantly on their intimacy.

For various reasons, into which it is unnecessary to enter minutely, Mr. Ensdell preferred consulting Mr. Sales rather than his brother, and, accordingly, the morning

after his interview with Mr. Twiss found him labouring up the flights of stairs which led to the chambers in the Temple. Mr. Sales was there conning, as usual, the advertisements in the *Standard;* and, laying the paper down as Mr. Ensdell entered the room, shook hands, and informed him there was no news. There never was for him—what could possibly occur to break the monotony of the life which vibrated between Clapham and the Temple from one year's end to the other, or to vary the tedium of its aimless discontent? No news—emperors might be shot and kingdoms rise and fall; there might be revolutions abroad and tumults at home, but what did it all matter to a man who had failed in his life, and could never forgive either himself or the world, because the wealth that should have been his had gone to another? No, there never was news either in *Standard* or *Star*, *Times*

or *Telegraph*, of sufficient moment to cause Mr. Sales to forget for a moment the injuries he had received from Fate. There was no news—none, he repeated, as Mr. Ensdell sat himself in a chair. But the information did not appear to be of much interest to that gentleman, who, like Mr. Sales, was so full of his own affairs as to have no thought for those of others. He had been to St. Jude's that morning, and the register confirmed Mr. Twiss's story. There was no question but that twenty years ago a Mr. Stephen Gervase Ainslie had married Mary Green; and it was equally certain that his handwriting was a *fac simile* of that of the present master of the Oaks. The whole question, then, according to Mr. Twiss, would be settled by the discovery of the ship's surgeon who had written to acquaint Mrs. Blount with her husband's death. And even if he were not to be found, other

confirmatory evidence of the convict's death might be discovered which would be equally useful in proving Meg's legitimacy, and the expediency of Mr. Ensdell's consulting his own interests by offering her the *amende honorable* of marriage.

This was the substance of the narrative which Mr. Ensdell poured into the ears of Mr. Sales. The barrister heard him at first with languid curiosity. The question as to whether or not the mother of Margaret Blount had been married, was not one likely to interest him, but gradually his interest awakened. He leant forward, and looked sharply and eagerly at Mr. Ensdell, taking in every word, and now and then cross-examining and questioning him with a patience and keenness that might have done him good service years ago in the Law Courts. Then, when he had obtained all the information Mr. Ensdell could give him,

he rose and went to the window, and, turning his face from his visitor, remained apparently absorbed in thought for five minutes. At the end of that time he turned round with, "You are positive—quite positive that the entry in the register is in Stanton's handwriting?"

"As sure as one can be of anything on this earth," was the reply. "But what do you say to going round and looking at it yourself?"

"I'll do so in the course of a day or two; but it would be as well for me to see this man Twiss. I should prefer doing so before I gave you a decided opinion as to the course you ought to pursue."

"Oh! as to that, my mind is made up. Once I'm satisfied that Mademoiselle Marguerite is really my cousin, I don't see how I can possibly do less than offer to make her my wife. What I want your help in is

to ascertain whether she really is so or not —and, 'pon my soul, I'm inclined to believe that she is. But see Twiss by all means. The fellow gave me his address—the old den where I caught a glimpse of him once when I went to see Madame Mére in her last illness. Number 13, Prospect Row, Swamp Town. What a place for the heiress of the Oaks to be reared in! You'll say so, I think, when you see it. No," continued Mr. Ensdell, looking thoughtfully in the rusty fireplace, "I have made up my mind what to do. If Mademoiselle is my cousin—legitimate or not—I marry her. I don't know whether her being legitimate will be very great odds in my favour. I suppose Stanton can do as he pleases with the estate, and he is not likely to make a young lady, about whose existence he has not troubled himself for nineteen years, co-heiress with Nelly. He might be brought

to acknowledge her—though I don't know —that would be an awkward thing for him to have to do; and if the property is entailed upon the eldest child, I really shouldn't like to make things unpleasant to him—I should be inclined to compromise and settle matters quietly. It must be such a deuce of a bore," said Mr. Ensdell, curling his moustache, "for a fellow to have a thing like this turning up years after he's thought he'd done with it for ever. Such a very awkward kind of ghost to have to lay. Of course his conduct at the time was not exactly what it should be. I always said he should have made the woman an allowance, and settled something on the child. Still, I shouldn't like to bear too hardly on him now. Let matters be as they may, I should prefer to settle them amicably, and with as little scandal as possible. No, I wouldn't be too hard on old Stanton, even

to be master of the Oaks."

Mr. Sales sat, during this monologue, listening to every word, endeavouring to ascertain whether Mr. Ensdell was really ignorant or oblivious of the fact that other rights and interests besides those of Margaret Blount might be affected by the fact that his kinsman's second marriage had not been a legal one. He appeared to be satisfied on the point, for he drew a long breath, as if of relief, and then rising, took up his hat and gloves.

"You won't mind my turning you out; I've an appointment to keep this morning, and I'll look at the register of St. Jude's on my way home. I'll take an early opportunity of calling on Mr. Twiss, and let you know the result."

He shook Mr. Ensdell's hand with a hurried, feverish nervousness, very different from the wearied listlessness of his usual

manner. Then, when his visitor had gone, instead of following him down stairs, he remained behind, pacing up and down the room with a restless excitability. There was much to be done, but he could not trust himself to do it till he was more composed; there was much to be thought of, too—so much, that his brain was almost in a whirl with the new hopes and ideas Mr. Ensdell's revelations had brought before it. And nothing could be done, nothing could be thought of to any purpose till his brain was cooler, and his heart had ceased to flutter like a frightened girl's. Was it to be so indeed? After all the years that he had been kept out of the inheritance that should have been his, was it to lapse to him at last? Was fortune going to make up to him for her ill-usage by showering wealth upon him with one hand, and with the other covering the rival who had supplanted him with contumely and

dishonour? It seemed so—a little time would show. A little time! Let the fever of the blood subside, and the brain be steady enough to do its work aright, and then—hey! for the register of St. Jude's, and a visit to the domicile of Mr. Twiss.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. ENSDELL WRITES HIMSELF DOWN A FOOL.

THE lace caps for Mrs. Vernon progressed under Meg's rapid fingers. Sometimes she worked at them in her own room, sometimes in Mrs. Potts' back garden, and sometimes, when the day was very fine and bright, carried her pillow to the copse, and sat down there, hoping each time that Miss Stanton might make her appearance there as well. In this she was disappointed. Nelly was detained at home by cares and troubles of various kinds. She had complained heretofore that her life was too easy and placid in its course, with nothing but her own enjoyment for its purpose—her

own happiness for its object—that with the best possible inclination to work, Providence had refused to give her anything to do. She had no cause for such complainings now. She had enough, and more than enough, to occupy her fully—so much, that it was nearly a fortnight before she had time even to think of Meg, and the work on which she had employed her. Mr. Stanton had had a second attack of paralysis, and one of a far more alarming nature than the first. There was a mystery, too, connected with its cause that made Mr. Vernon, when he came to the house, which he now did daily, look pitifully and tenderly at Nelly, as if longing to tell her that, let what would happen, he would befriend her to the utmost. Arnold Ensdell had been sent for on the first alarm, and came frequently to the house. Mr. Ensdell was staying there, but what it was that made them all,

even him, look and speak so differently to her from what they had done when Mr. Stanton was last attacked, was a mystery Nelly was unable to fathom. And what could there be in the letter, the reading of which had thrown her father into this state? Why, when discovered with it, helpless and semi-conscious, should the fingers still retain it in an almost convulsive grasp, and only yield it at last to Arnold Ensdell, while the white lips murmured something, which it was with difficulty he could catch, even when he bent his ear close to them? And what had made Arnold's face blanch as he read that letter? and why had her father, when he looked at him with an incredulous questioning, given no answer, but the pitiful, pleading from his eyes of utter helplessness? Let that letter tell what it might, there was no denial of it in her father's look. Nelly had seen it all, though she only understood it in part.

There was something very terrible in that letter—Arnold could not deny as much when she had questioned him, let him try to evade her as he might. Some great trouble menaced her father—that Arnold had told her—and told her, too, she must be satisfied for the present to know no more. It was to be hoped she never would know—if the cloud that hovered over him passed away, she must forget that she had ever seen it, if only in mercy to her father. And meanwhile Mr. Stanton's condition tasked his daughter's energies to the utmost. There was danger—undeniable danger—but it was not that alone which made his eyes follow her every movement, and his hand—the one poor hand that still retained some power of motion—search for hers, and hold it by the hour together. Nelly felt that this sorrow, let it be what it might, weighed on him more heavily than his illness—that

this unseen trouble filled him with far more dread than death, and that the wild, helpless agony of those eyes was caused by other terrors than those of the grave.

It was difficult for Arnold Ensdell to ascertain what course the sick man wished him to pursue, as he lay there, almost incapable of expressing his wishes; but immediate action was necessary; and, therefore, gathering what he could from the half intelligible replies made to his questions, he hurried up to London, and after an interview with Mr. Stanton's solicitor, sought his brother in Courtmain Street. Little as there was in common between them, still they were brothers, and bound to do their best for their kinsman in his need. Therefore, Arnold Ensdell acquainted his brother with Mr. Stanton's relapse, and placed the letter which had caused it in his hands.

It was from Mr. Sales. He had lost no

time in learning all that the register of St. Jude's could tell him, and in calling on Mr. Twiss. The interview with that gentleman had been highly satisfactory. He had discovered that the ship's surgeon was still living, and at the present time in England. It would not be difficult to find him; and Mr. Twiss was very ready to do so and ascertain how far he might be relied on as a witness. He had nothing else to occupy him at present but the search for Meg, and as it was a matter of perfect unimportance to Mr. Sales whether she was found or not, in spite of Mr. Ensdell's retaining fee, Mr. Twiss promised to devote his energies to the discovery of the ship's surgeon. Mr. Sales' next step was to place his case in the hands of a solicitor well known to him for his skill in working out difficult cases successfully; and the letter which Mr. Ensdell was now perusing had been drawn up in that gentleman's office.

More than a week had elapsed since Mr. Ensdell's visit to the Temple. He had seen nothing of Mr. Sales or Mr. Twiss either in the interim, and this letter was as great a surprise to him as it had been to his brother. He had thought of his own interests only in the matter—the possibility of Mr. Sales' being affected by his late cousin's having made an illegal marriage, or, rather, no marriage at all, had not occurred to him. He had made an egregious blunder, and an irretrievable one. He was sorry for Mr. Stanton, sorry for Nelly, but sorriest of all that he had not only betrayed his kinsman, but had betrayed him like a fool! To think that he should have overlooked the fact that Sales was the next of kin to Mr. Stanton's late wife, and if that lady had not been a wife, and had died intestate, her heir-at-law.

The letter asserted as much. It was a clear statement of Mr. Sales' claims to the

whole of the late Mrs. Stanton's, otherwise Alice Sales', property, "she having died without lawful issue;" and the marriage settlements, which gave the property to Mr. Stanton for his life, being of no effect, the marriage itself having been null and void from the first.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Mr. Ensdell; "dispute or compromise?"

"Compromise is out of the question, I take it," was the reply. "Either Stanton was or was not lawfully married to Mary Blount. If Sales proves the former, he takes his late cousin's fortune, with the interest accruing for the last six years. If Stanton was not married to her, it would be folly of him to yield an inch. John Wynde would, else, as soon as the breath was out of his body, assert his claim to the mastership of the Oaks. The estates were entailed on Stanton's marriage to his heirs, lawfully

begotten. If his marriage with Alice Sales was void, he can have no heir unless by Martha Blount. There is no mention of one in this letter. But that says nothing. It is quite immaterial to Sales who has or who has not the Oaks. Alice Sales' property is all that he can claim; but if that claim is at all allowed, it will make it a much easier thing for John Wynde to assert his. No, there is nothing for us but to fight it out. With what success remains to be seen."

"And what do you think of the chances of success?" asked Mr. Ensdell.

"Not too hopefully. I think Sales would not have commenced proceedings unless he had some certain ground to go upon; and unless Stanton had good reason for alarm, he would not have been struck down as he is by the blow. From what little I can gather from him, I should say there is no

question but that a marriage took place between himself and Mary Blount; but till this letter announced the fact of her first husband's death before such marriage took place, he was perfectly satisfied as to its illegality. The question I opine will just turn upon this—whether or not the other side can prove the exact date of the man's death."

Mr. Ensdell did not feel it incumbent on him to tell Arnold his own reasons for believing that they would not find that so difficult a matter. It was bad enough to have to write himself down a fool—it would be infinitely worse for Arnold to be able to write him down one too. But when his brother had left him, it occurred to him that after all his folly might turn out better than another man's wisdom. He had acted in good faith, and if by so doing he had unintentionally injured Mr. Stanton, he might

not the less have benefited his own interests very considerably. It was something to find that if Mr. Stanton's second marriage was null and void, Meg would be his heiress. It would be a much better and pleasanter state of things that he should have a daughter in that position, than an heir in the person of John Wynde. Nelly, of course, was to be pitied; but then, Meg was to be congratulated. The sum total of happiness after all would be the same, only the balance would be in Meg's favour instead of her sister's. And Mr. Ensdell felt that it was in him to make a very liberal brother-in-law, and that, on the whole, if this unhappy affair was to come out—and it must have come out sooner or later—Mr. Stanton might think himself very fortunate if he fell into no worse hands than his. As to any little unpleasantness he might feel—and, of course, he would have something of that

kind to undergo—after all, it was no more than a retribution for his first misdoings. He had behaved very shabbily to that unfortunate woman—Mr. Ensdell, with a virtuous self-complacency, congratulated himself upon having always said as much; and the going through any form of marriage with her was really almost an unpardonable folly. Mr. Ensdell felt that his own course of conduct was marked out very clearly. It was his positive duty, to say nothing of his inclination, to find out Margaret Blount and make her Margaret Ensdell.

And, meanwhile, Arnold Ensdell was in his dingy chambers trying hard to catch up the arrears of work which had accumulated even during his two days' absence at the Oaks, and to gain time for further visits there. Work was thronging on him now—his ill-fortune seemed almost tired of persecuting him. But it was hard, very hard to

work to-night. Nelly's face and Nelly's voice were haunting the dull rooms. "What business had they there at such a time?" None at all; but still they came, making work almost an impossibility. At last Arnold pushed his papers from him, and gave himself up to the delight of reverie on the possibilities of what *might* happen if Mr. Sales' claim was established, and John Wynde succeeded in asserting his. It was selfish to a degree to wish it; but let him try his best to persuade himself that he did not wish it, he could not help feeling that Nelly, homeless, penniless, even with the brand of illegitimacy on her name, might be his for the winning, which Nelly, the heiress and future mistress of the Oaks, and entitled to the best match in the county, could never be?

Selfish—it was selfish—he told himself so over and over again; but, not the less he

indulged in his dream for a full hour at least, when he arose, and putting resolutely away the visions that had risen before him of a small suburban villa, with Nelly for its mistress, set to work at his papers and briefs, and plodded on till midnight. Then he arose and retired to rest—a happier and a hopefuller man, for all the shadows that hung over the Oaks, than he had ever yet been in all his life.

Certainly, in this instance at least, there was something in the misfortunes of his friends not wholly displeasing to Arnold Ensdell.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RIPENING OF THE HARVEST.

IT was not very long before, even in the midst of her own troubles, Nelly Stanton found time to think of Meg's. She could not leave her father to go so far as the village, but she dispatched the note requesting Meg to bring the lace as soon as finished to the Oaks, and the next day accordingly saw Meg there, with her handiwork. She was shown into the octagon room, now nearly completed, where Mary Norton was putting the finishing touches to the walls. The little chamber was a perfect bower of floral beauty, and Meg looked round with pleased and brightening eyes.

"Do you like it?" asked Mary.

"Like it! oh! Miss Norton, what else can any one do. It's more beautiful than I can say—and—and—will Miss Stanton make this her sitting-room?"

"When she has time, I suppose so," replied Mary. "But I am afraid it will be a long while first—her father is so ill, and she is almost always in his room. I don't know when she will be able to see to the furnishing of this."

Nelly and Mrs. Winthrop both entered at this moment. The former ran up to Meg. "I am so sorry I have not been able to come and see you; but poor papa takes up so much of my time. I have not stirred out of the grounds since I met you in the copse. Have you brought me the caps? Oh! Mary, aren't they beautiful? What am I to give you for them? Not know the value of your own work! Mrs. Winthrop, you're a judge

of lace. Now, what ought I to have paid for these caps in a shop at the West End?"

Mrs. Winthrop touched the caps as though they were pitch, and she would be defiled by so doing. She was sure that Meg was the very same young person who had startled her out of her propriety in Mr. Ensdell's studio, and what did she mean by intruding into a respectable house, and offering her wares for sale? Still, the lace was good of the sort; and the caps, with a little pink riband, would be very becoming. A sovereign a-piece would not be too much for them, and so she told Nelly—turning her eyes away, however, from Meg, who was too sinful even to be looked at, much less spoken to.

Meg found two bright gold pieces slipped into her hands.

"I know I shall want something more done soon," said Nelly—"and Mrs. Vernon

will too. I'm sure I shall be able to get you plenty of customers in a little time—if only papa gets better for me to see people. Mrs. Winthrop, don't *you* want some caps? I'm sure you do, now I come to think of it. Now just try this one on, and see how it suits. Mary, did you ever see Mrs. Winthrop look so well? If we had only a glass. Come with me into the next room—there's one there."

Nelly led Mrs. Winthrop into the adjoining apartment, and that lady could not but own that the cap was extremely becoming. "But, my dear," she whispered nervously, "that—that young person is not what she should be,—and these caps—well, they are very pretty—but I don't think I'm doing my duty by allowing her to make any for me."

"We won't talk about *that*," said Nelly decidedly. "If you'll remember, you gave me a lecture about the very same thing the

last time you saw the poor girl. Now, you know, I really have no time to be lectured just at present, or else I'm sure, if it made you any happier to do so, you should lecture as long as you please. Suppose you order the caps now, and make up your mind as to whether it's right or not to wear them afterwards. I'll trim them myself if you do. And I want you, besides, to get Mrs. Orley and some of the sisterhood to employ Margaret Blount. And couldn't you persuade Mr. Marsh to do so, too? Only suggest to him that vestments trimmed with broad pillow lace would have a superb effect. If you tell him so, he'll be sure to give her an order."

"My dear! Cordelia would never forgive me for naming such a girl to her."

"Oh! yes, she would, if the lace was good and cheap—and I dare say at first this poor girl wouldn't stand out too much

about her price. Besides, what business have we to say any more of Margaret Blount than that she makes beautiful lace, and is very glad to find purchasers for it? Try this other cap—well, it suits you better than the first. A pale blush rose on this side, and the effect would be exquisite. Now, how many will you have? and which pattern? Mary, come here, Mrs. Winthrop wants your advice."

"I think the last is the best," said Mrs. Winthrop; "and if I thought I was doing right in ordering them——"

"Of course you are," said Nelly—"don't I tell you so? Mary, don't you think that some morning, when Mr. Marsh is here, Mrs. Winthrop might persuade him that lace vestments would be very becoming? Oh! dear, I wish I'd time to talk to him, and I'd try and persuade him that lace cravats were eighteen hundred years ago an indispensable part of priestly costume."

"My dear—my dear, don't laugh like that at sacred things; it makes me quite uncomfortable, and I don't think it's right."

"No, it isn't; but Mr. Marsh and his vestments are not sacred things, and I don't see that one can do anything else but laugh at them, unless to cry. But now, as to the caps, which, after all, are of much more consequence than Mr. Marsh. How many will you have?—two to begin with, the same pattern as these?"

Mrs. Winthrop acquiesced. The caps were so very pretty—quite pretty enough to cause her to forget for a time the shortcomings of their maker—nay, she even promised to mention Meg to Mrs. Orley. After all, why should she tell Cordelia anything but that she made lace beautifully? Only, if Cordelia were ever to discover that her lace-maker had not always been as unimpeachably correct as any one honoured by

being allowed to work for her should be! And then Mrs. Winthrop's courage failed, and she looked fearfully at Nelly, as if to ask her, in that case, how should she bear Cordelia's anger?

"There! don't trouble yourself about that; but come, and tell this poor girl to set your caps in hand at once."

Meg was very much pleased to hear of further work. "Will you please to bring them home as soon as they are done?" said Nelly. "I am afraid I shall not be able to come and see you, and—and," she hesitated, "here is a little book—will you take and keep it for my sake?"

It was a little dainty volume, bound in purple velvet and gold, with some signs of wear, too, for its usual place was the writing-table in Nelly's bedroom; but it was very pretty, and some instinct had told Nelly that it would be prized the more be-

cause it bore her name inside, and showed some traces of perusal.

"You'll—you'll read it sometimes?" she asked, timidly.

"Through and through," replied Meg, "and over and over again." She knew not what it was she was pledging herself to read. It was quite enough that Nelly's lips had asked her to do so, and that her sweet wistful eyes brightened at the promise. Then she went away, rejoicing in another treasure to be added to the glove, and Nelly returned to her duties in her father's sick-room.

Mr. Stanton was now out of immediate danger, able to articulate feebly, and, perhaps unhappily for himself, possessed of his full mental faculties. Unhappily, for let the past have wrought what ill it might, he was powerless now to rectify it. He had sown the wind, and now lay weak and

prone beneath the whirlwind, which threatened to bury not only him beneath its ruins, but one dearer even than himself. All his life he had been cased in the proof armour of selfishness, but through this armour Nelly had found her way to his very heart. He had never known but one true unselfish love, and now it seemed as if the object of that love was to suffer more keenly than any other at his hands. He had done wrong, in that early Bohemian life of his, to marry. Why was she, of all the world, to reap the retribution of that wrong. If it had only fallen on him, and crushed him to the dust, so that it had passed safely over her!

He would have nothing kept from him. Whatever letters came were brought to him at once—there was no keeping him quiet as the physicians prescribed—the very attempt to do so did far more harm than

good. Consequently, Arnold Ensdell, on his visits, told him all that was taking place with regard to Mr. Sales, and the proceeding his own solicitors had adopted. Mr. Sales had lost no time in commencing a suit in Chancery to substantiate his rights; and upon the issue of this suit, as Mr. Stanton well knew, not only Nelly's inheritance of her mother's fortune, but her claim to his own, depended. If it went against him, Nelly would be illegitimate and almost penniless. He had lived up to his income—not beyond, but still quite up to it. What little personalty he had a right to bequeath would be more than absorbed by Mr. Sales' claim, and the last six years' interest; and he knew quite enough of Mr. Sales to expect that he would not be merciful in the day of his triumph. If he could only have lived—only been sure of his life for another twenty—even ten years, that he might make

some provision for his girl! But life was not much longer for him. If he could be spared a few months, to see how the suit on which so much hung terminated, it would be the utmost he could hope for. And if it went against him, Nelly would be left not only portionless and fatherless, but a waif and stray, with no right even to the name she was bearing.

He had done a great wrong years ago, and nothing now could make that wrong right. And the punishment was to fall on the innocent head for which he would have laid his own down a thousand times. He knew that death was near, but he had no thought for the unseen world. The cares of this were pressing on him too heavily. Even if there were terrors and tortures beyond the grave, they could not be greater than those he was suffering now. He felt no repentance for the wrong he had done

the woman whom he had betrayed, and sent from him with her child in her arms. Sometimes he thought she might be living, and have told Sales her story. Then he felt a little vague wonder as to the possibility of the child's having survived, and being now aware of her probable inheritance. It was to be hoped that, even if living, she knew nothing of it. Better far that at his death the estate should revert to John Wynde—a gentleman at least, who would maintain the old place in all due honour—than to a girl reared as Mary Blount's daughter was likely to be. She, his lawful heir, could only be a living scandal to his name—an enduring blot upon his memory—a shame and a reproach to the sister she had supplanted. No, better far that she had died an infant, or before this had perished—as pariahs like her perish in the workhouse or the river.

No, he had no pity for this unknown child—no remorse for the wrong he had done either her or her mother. He had pity, but it was for his cherished darling, whom he had loved and guarded eighteen years, and who was now threatened with shame and penury. He had remorse, but it was for the exceeding folly of which he had been guilty in humouring the scruples of a woman of Mary Blount's position, and going through a form of marriage with her. Or if he had been weak enough so to humour her, why had he not made sure that her husband was living at the time before he contracted another marriage? He did not blame himself for his treachery and duplicity—in truth, his moral perceptions were so blunted, that I believe he had no clear consciousness of either; but he did for his folly. Over and over again he repeated to himself that he had been the veriest and most egregious fool

that ever breathed, and Nelly was to reap the harvest of his idiocy. He could never forgive himself; not for the evil he had knowingly inflicted on the woman who had trusted him, and the child he had disdained to acknowledge; but for that which he had wrought, in ignorance, upon the only daughter he had deigned to recognise.

Something of his anxieties he had disclosed to Mr. Vernon—and the old gentleman's knowledge of his parishioner's character enabled him to guess the rest. However, he did all that Mr. Stanton had hoped he would—promised that Nelly should always find a home in the Rectory while he had one to offer her. Mrs. Vernon, too, sent kindly messages to the same effect, not to Nelly, but to her father. Till the worst came —and that the worst would come Mr. Stanton felt convinced—he wished his daughter to remain in ignorance of the coming evil.

Time enough for her to dread the blow when it was about to fall. Mr. Vernon's promise was something, but it was a sad future for his Nelly to look forward to—his Nelly to be a dependant on the bounty of others—to leave her own luxurious home to live a guest, received through charity, in the sombre walls of the old Rectory. If she had only married before this came! And selfish as the man was, he felt that he would gladly have missed Nelly's voice and presence, though they were the very light of his life, and have known that, let what would happen, she had found safe shelter in a husband's arms. The loneliness would have been very hard to bear, but the loneliness would have been better than the dreary outlook into Nelly's future.

Mr. Ensdell came sometimes to the Oaks. bored him immensely to do so, but still, der the circumstances, it was his duty to bmit to the boredom. He was, as I have

said, very gentle and tender to Nelly; if it should happen that he became her brother-in-law, he was resolved to be a most indulgent one; and he was very sympathetic towards Mr. Stanton, and full of promises that, if Sales won his suit, he would do his best, as far as in him lay, to befriend Nelly. He was sincere in all he said, and really very sorry for his kinsfolks' troubles; but not the less it was rather an infliction to be much at the Oaks, and a tax both upon his patience and his spirits. Besides, he had Meg to look for. Mr. Twiss had not succeeded in discovering her—indeed, Mr. Twiss had other employment just now, thanks to Mr. Sales; and Mr. Ensdell felt that, if Meg were to be discovered at all, it must be by his own exertions. Therefore, every day in town he spent in very different haunts from his usual ones. Down the close, stifling streets, where ragged women leaned from the windows, or stood at the doorways,

trying to catch a breath of air—where squalid children played in the gutters, and evil-looking men eyed him askance, as if to ask his business—Mr. Ensdell went. Once or twice he had summoned up courage to visit West-end streets at the time when Vice held its highest revel there. And he looked into the painted faces on which the gas light fell, thinking that perhaps one of them might be Meg's. Then he had blamed himself for the thought. The girl would not be one of these. It was not to consort with such that she had left him. He might find her at the doors of a theatre vending playbills; at the corner of a street selling flowers; perhaps even under one of the dark arches, numbed, and cold, and starving—but he should *not* find her flaunting and bold in the livery of infamy! Even he could not but feel that the letter which she had left for him came from a soul that would die before it sinned again.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESULTS OF MR. MARSH'S WOOING.

THE octagon room was finished, but Mary Norton still remained at the Oaks. It was by Mr. Stanton's wish that she did so, as he felt that under the present circumstances Nelly had need of more cheering companionship than Mrs. Winthrop's. The octagon room had been the means of procuring several commissions for Mary, and it was much easier and pleasanter for her to execute them at the Oaks, with the abundance of material around her, than in Elma Place. A small room near Mr. Stanton's served her as a studio, and here Nelly came at times when her father was sleeping, or

had sent her from him—a thing he would sometimes bring himself to do when she looked paler and more worn than usual. Mrs. Winthrop would have been left very much to herself at this time had it not been that of late Mrs. Orley had been nearly as frequent in her visits to the Oaks as Mr. Marsh, although they seldom arrived at the same time; and Mr. Marsh's visits at length culminated in the result Mary Norton had been anticipating, and Mrs. Winthrop received a formal offer from him. This was the intelligence she communicated to Nelly within an hour after the Curate's departure from the house, or rather that Nelly elicited when she found her chaperon in a state of unusual agitation. It was an inexpressible relief to Mrs. Winthrop to have some one to whom she could confide what had happened. She was evidently a little flattered, but still more frightened, by the honour that had

been paid her, and she turned almost tearfully to Nelly at last with, "Well, my dear, and what do you think I'd better do?"

"Now, I should say that depends on yourself," replied Nelly. "You really ought to know more about such things than I do. Now I come to think of it, I've never had an offer in my life, and you must have had one, at least, before Mr. Marsh proposed. It seems to me the first thing to be thought of is whether you like him."

"But I don't, my dear," said Mrs. Winthrop, mournfully. "That's the most distressing part of the affair."

"The most conclusive, you mean," replied Nelly. "I suppose you've told him so; and, in that case, there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh! yes, there is, my dear, unhappily. I couldn't tell him just that, you know; it would have seemed so excessively rude to

his face—but I have to Cordelia over and over again, and she insists upon it that my liking has nothing to do with the matter—in fact, that it's positively sinful on my part to consult my own inclinations at all, unless it is with a view to mortify them. She will have it that it's my positive duty to take Mr. Marsh because I have a little property, and he has none; and that the good I may do to the Church by doing so is far more important than my own wishes. Now, you know, my dear, that's a very uncomfortable way of getting married; and I really don't think Mr. Marsh and I should get on very well together, if the good of the Church was all we had in view—I don't indeed," said Mrs. Winthrop, earnestly.

"But why didn't you tell her so?" said Nelly—"and what have you told Mr. Marsh?"

"To call again to-morrow," replied Mrs.

Winthrop. "I really didn't know what else to say, nor how to get rid of him."

"And when he does come to-morrow, what will you tell him?" asked Nelly.

"My dear, I haven't the remotest notion," said Mrs. Winthrop, helplessly. "But I expect Cordelia round this afternoon, and I know what she will tell me I ought to do. She'll insist upon my accepting him, and I'm very much afraid—very much indeed—that whether I will or not, Cordelia will marry me to Mr. Marsh."

Nelly drew her chair closer to the table, on which she had rested her elbows, and leaning her dimpled chin on her pretty hands, meditated severely for two minutes. Then she raised her head. "You really don't like him?—you're quite sure of that?"

"My dear, I'm positive; if he even shaved it would be better; but a beard, and a black beard, always was my detestation."

"Then you shan't have him!" said Nelly —"I'll take care of that. You're quite sure, now, that even the cutting off the beard wouldn't make any difference?"

"No, I really don't believe it would. The fact is, I think, when a woman marries, she ought to have her husband to herself. Now, nobody could have that that married Mr. Marsh. With the sisterhood and Cordelia taking up so much of his time, as they do, I should like to know where my share would be? I don't think I'm very exacting, but I shouldn't like to see Cordelia monopolizing Mr. Marsh, if he were my husband, as she does now. And I believe, my dear, if he was my husband, she'd think she'd a better right to him than ever."

"Well, if you're quite sure—positive that you really don't care for him, don't trouble yourself about Mrs. Orley. If she comes to-day, let her say what she pleases, and

don't commit yourself—I think that's what the lawyers say in such cases. Now, whatever you do, don't make any promises as regards Mr. Marsh. It will be quite out of my power to help you if you do," said Nelly, with the utmost solemnity; "but if you'll only keep quiet, I'll take care that you shan't marry him or any one else against your own inclination."

Nelly left Mrs. Winthrop comforted in some degree by her positive assurance that she should not be married against her will; then, looking into her father's room, and finding him still asleep, she returned to Mary Norton, and informed her of Mrs. Winthrop's fears, and her own intention of protecting her both against Mr. Marsh and Mrs. Orley. Mr. Marsh himself would not be very difficult to dispose of; but Mrs. Orley, grim, precise, and forbidding, was a very different person. Both the girls could

quite understand, though they could not share, Mrs. Winthrop's dread of her; and it really seemed not at all impossible, that unless summary measures were taken, Mrs. Orley would have her own way in the matter, and marry her cousin to her pet Curate.

"If we could only get her out of the way," sighed Mary Norton. "Couldn't you persuade her, Nelly, that she's in want of change of air?"

"Yes; but she wouldn't travel alone, for the world," replied Nelly; "and situated as papa is, it's quite out of the question my going with her. There's Mrs. Orley coming up to the house. Mary, will you bet me a pair of gloves that, in spite of all Mrs. Winthrop's promises, she don't ask you and me to be her bridesmaids?"

Mrs. Orley was indeed advancing towards the house, and Father Vivian was following

in her rear. He had been a very frequent visitor at the commencement of Mr. Stanton's illness, but of late that gentleman had received no one but Mr. Vernon. Father Vivian had an instinctive fear that other troubles were impending over the Oaks than those caused by the illness of its master—but of the precise nature of these troubles he knew no more than did the world at large at Summerly. But of Mr. Marsh's intentions towards Mrs. Winthrop he was by no means in ignorance. The Curate had now and then breathed out his hopes to him, and even had he not, Mrs. Orley's half confidences this morning would have enlightened him fully. Mr. Marsh had acted on the old axiom, that the woman who deliberates is lost; and as Mrs. Winthrop had asked for time, and requested him to come again the next day, he had considered her doing so tantamount to an acceptance, and had has-

tened forthwith to acquaint Mrs. Orley with his good fortune. But Mrs. Orley knew her cousin better than Mr. Marsh did. "Lucinda never did know her own mind yet," she considered, "and always wanted some one to tell her what she really liked best," and therefore, as she had intended to call on her that morning, she would take the opportunity of telling her the only proper decision to which she could arrive, with regard to Mr. Marsh. But she was elated that he really had proposed; she had sometimes feared lest his wavering inclinations should fix themselves upon Miss Werner. He had vibrated between the two ladies with as much regularity as the pendulum of a clock, and it was something to have brought one of the parties at least to the point she wished; if she could only contrive to bring the other, and achieve a marriage so every way desirable, Mrs. Orley felt that she would not have lived in

vain. It would be a triumph over the Werners, for her cousin to have borne away the prize for which Rachel Mary had been sighing so long. And as the Werners were Mrs. Orley's most intimate friends, a triumph over them would, of course, be infinitely pleasanter than a triumph over any one else. And it would be a good thing for the Church—which had already far too many needy curates—to have one of its members enriched by a marriage with a well-to-do widow; and it would be a good thing for Mrs. Orley's own importance and local influence to have the direction of the Curate's wife, and through her of the Curate himself.

Mrs. Orley felt more calmly self-satisfied than ever when she thought how she had brought matters so far to a successful issue, and her elation made itself apparent to Father Vivian, as he walked by her side.

Without directly telling him so much, she let him learn that Mr. Marsh had proposed, and that the acceptance was only conditional upon her approval.

They parted in the hall, Mrs. Orley proceeding at once to her cousin's sitting-room, and Father Vivian being shown into the small back drawing-room, which Mary Norton now occupied as a studio. Both the girls were pleased to see him. Mary Norton liked him because he had just sufficient knowledge of Art to be a discerning critic, and just enough good-nature to be a kindly one; while Nelly always found in him a ready and sympathizing listener to her anxieties about her father and her responsibilities as regarded Mrs. Winthrop. They were both, therefore, a little vexed to hear that he was going to leave the neighbourhood for a few months, perhaps longer, having been appointed confessor to the sisterhood of St.

Elgitha at Waterholme. It was not yet decided whether his duties there would be permanent, but the summons to perform them was immediate, and he was about to start on the morrow, St. Elgitha's daughters being left, at the present moment, through the dangerous illness of their late confessor, without a priest to shrive their sins or lead their orisons.

"To-morrow?" remarked Nelly. "That is very sudden! We shall be so sorry to lose you, Father Vivian. Poor papa always enjoyed your visits so much when he was able to receive them. I don't know Waterholme. Is it far from here?"

"About seventy miles from town, on the south coast. A little watering-place rising into repute. The sisters receive a few pupils; and now and then an invalid Catholic lady is glad to reside with them for awhile, which is a benefit to their finances and her

own health. The air is very fine—at least, the local doctors say so, and I suppose one is bound to believe them," replied Father Vivian.

"Seventy miles from London, fine air, and a nice quiet watering-place," observed Nelly. "Didn't you say it was very pretty? Well, we'll take that for granted. Mary, wouldn't it be the very thing for Mrs. Winthrop? Father Vivian," she added, eagerly, "I'm going to ask you a very great favour. Would you mind taking Mrs. Winthrop down to Waterholme with you? She is really very much in want of change of air, but is too nervous to travel by herself, and if the sisters take in Catholic ladies, perhaps they wouldn't mind taking in one who is not a Catholic for once. You know poor Mrs. Winthrop isn't at all particular. She'd go to mass with the utmost politeness—confession, too, if they made a point of it; only,

poor dear, she'd forget half her sins, if she hadn't somebody with her to remind her of them. Would you oblige me, Father? You don't know of what importance it is to Mrs. Winthrop to have immediate change of air and scene!"

Father Vivian was a little surprised at the request. It was so singular a thing for a lady to want to shut herself up in a nunnery on the very eve of her marriage; and Mrs. Winthrop, when he had last seen her, had struck him as being in even better health than usual. But he knew enough of Mrs. Orley to be aware that if there was any difference of opinion between her cousin and herself as to her marriage, nothing but flight would save Mrs. Winthrop from obeying the behests of the former lady. And if Mrs. Winthrop was in need of a quiet home and a safe shelter from the love-pleadings of Mr. Marsh, why should he refuse to assist her to

one? It was possible that she might find so safe a haven in the precincts of St. Elgitha, that she might never care to leave its holy walls; in which case he should be doing his Church good service, as well as performing a kindness to an estimable lady, and also—and this was a consideration to which the Father was by no means indifferent—pleasing the prettiest girl it had ever been his good fortune to come near.

Accordingly, he signified his readiness not only to take charge of Mrs. Winthrop to Waterholme, but to do his best, when there, to induce the sisters to receive her for a time into their fold. And should their rules be too stringent to allow of their doing so, he would take care to see her comfortably housed either in apartments or in a respectable boarding-house. Nothing could be kinder or more fatherly than the Father; and Nelly, to show her gratitude, rang for tea—

a rare piece of hospitality on her part since Mr. Stanton's illness—and handed the Father his cup herself, and waited on him as assiduously as if he had been her favourite Mr. Vernon.

But as soon as the Father had gone, and Nelly had ascertained that Mrs. Orley had left the house, she proceeded to Mrs. Winthrop. There was no time to be lost if she was to start at nine o'clock the next morning, and Nelly intended she should.

"I've settled it all!" she exclaimed, as she entered the room where Mrs. Winthrop was sitting with folded hands, looking even more mournfully helpless, more utterly at the mercy of any one who chose to take the trouble of directing her, than ever. "I've settled it all!" she repeated, "and arranged everything charmingly for you."

"Cordelia's settled it too, my dear," said Mrs. Winthrop, with a faint shiver. "She

has just told me that she shall take it upon herself to let Mr. Marsh know the whole affair is concluded, and he's coming to-morrow to—to thank me for the answer she's going to give him to-day," added Mrs. Winthrop, quite hysterically.

"And, after all you promised me, you really mean to take him—beard and all?" asked Nelly.

"It's all Cordelia's doing. I never could say no to Cordelia in all my life, and she'll have her own way in this, as she has in everything else," said Mrs. Winthrop, mournfully.

"No, she won't, if you'll only be guided by me," said Nelly. "I tell you, I've arranged everything. You'll have to go away from here to-morrow."

"Go away!—my dear child!——"

"Well, if you don't, you'll have to marry Mr. Marsh; and I think myself I'd run to

the furthermost ends of the earth sooner than incur such a fate. But perhaps, after all, you don't think it so terrible——"

"My dear," said Mrs. Winthrop, solemnly, "I'd go anywhere—do anything to avoid it; but if I stop here, as sure as my name is Lucinda, Cordelia will marry me to Mr. Marsh, whether I will or not."

"But you're not going to stop. I've settled it all with Father Vivian."

"You've never told him?" said Mrs. Winthrop, a faint blush overspreading her features.

"I've told him nothing but that you want change of air, and are afraid of travelling by yourself. He is going to Waterholme to-morrow—a nice quiet watering-place—and will take charge of you on the road. You must meet him at the Summerly station by nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Mary Norton and I will drive down there

with you. Once under the Father's care, we know you're safe. And there's one comfort, as he's not allowed to marry, he can't make love to you on the way."

This seemed to reassure Mrs. Winthrop a little. She had endured a great deal during Mr. Marsh's courtship—too much for her willingly to pass through such an ordeal again—but still she hesitated. "If—if—Mr. Marsh should follow me!"

"I've provided even against that," cried Nelly, triumphantly. "Father Vivian thinks he can find a home for you in the sisterhood of St. Elgitha. You'll be under the protection of the Lady Abbess. From all I've read of Lady Abbesses, I should think even Mrs. Orley would not care to encounter one; and if Mr. Marsh should follow you to Waterholme, he can only see you through the grate in the presence of one of the nuns, and I don't think even

Mr. Marsh could make love under such trying circumstances. Now I must go to papa, but I shall ring for Ridge to pack up. There's one thing, you'll have to attend mass; but as you've been so often to St. Paul's with Mrs. Orley, I don't suppose you will object to that. It will be really very nearly the same kind of thing, only much better done. Here's Ridge; now just tell her what to put up for you, and before I go to bed I'll see the boxes corded and labelled."

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER MEETING IN THE COPSE.

MEG was leading a life that, if not happy, was at least very still and peaceful. She had plenty of employment, for Mrs. Winthrop's caps had been duly seen and admired; and Mrs. Orley, and several of the members of the sisterhood, had given her commissions. Indeed, the ladies came so often that Mrs. Potts, though she congratulated Meg on her good fortune in having so many customers, began at times to wish they would not be so frequent in their visits to the cottage, for Bob was catechised and Bill examined, and Mrs. Potts herself taken

to task as to her persistent absence from church. It was impossible to find fault with her for attendance at chapel, as that had been closed for some time, and Mr. Harley had left the neighbourhood. Mr. Marsh had exulted mightily in consequence, and the sisterhood had been jubilant over the downfall of heresy. Meg, too, had been severely exercised by Mrs. Orley on account of her absence from St. Paul's. She had gone there three or four times, and then resolved never to go again. It had not given her what she wanted—what she had hungered and thirsted for; and she was angry with a quiet, sullen anger, at having been so mocked and disappointed. To Mrs. Orley she said simply that she did not go to church because she did not understand it—it was like the play, only not so good, and not so amusing either, inasmuch as it was the same thing over and over again. Then

Mrs. Orley waxed wroth, but anger was thrown away upon Meg—she heard all the lady had to say with unmoved composure, working at her lace the while—hearing her, perhaps, with all the more calmness, as half she said was utterly unintelligible. Mrs. Orley gave her up as impracticable, and would have given up the lace too, but Meg's handiwork was becoming the fashion in Summerly, and Mrs. Orley could not bring herself to go without it. There was some talk of employing her on vestments for Mr. Marsh, but there arose a serious question amongst the sisterhood as to whether or not pillow-lace had been worn by the early Anglican Church, and there was a delicacy about referring the question to Mr. Marsh, as it had been proposed that the vestments, if made at all, should be subscribed for by the sisterhood, and presented to him. Mrs. Orley entered into correspondence with

several of the leading lights in Anglican ritual upon the matter, and, while it was pending, did her best to bring Meg over to a state of mind befitting one likely to be employed upon such work. Two or three of the sisterhood assisted in the attempted conversion, mingling discussions upon symbolic patterns and symbolic rites, pearl edgings and the duty of unquestioning belief, obedience to the Church, and the depth of bordering required for the stole, till Meg became more hopelessly bewildered, and more sullenly angry than ever.

What did it all mean? What was the outcome of it all? Was this Church, from whose teachings she had hoped to learn the way to peace and righteousness, and pure and holy living, great only in robes and vestments, skilled only in lighting candles and arranging flowers? What would it have done for her had she sought it in Swamp

Town? How should she ever have learned to avoid the sin and impurity, the very thought of which was now enough to chill her heart with horror? What did it do for the girls around?—the girls who sometimes jested at sacred things, more often, parrot-like, repeated them, but who seemed as lost to shame, as prone to evil, for all the Sunday-school teaching of their early years, for all the exhortations of the sisterhood to be punctual at church and regular at confession, for all the tracts with which their homes were deluged, as any of the female denizens of Swamp Town. What had it done for them? And what was it doing for her, that she should give it the implicit obedience and faith that it demanded? Whom was she to obey, and in what was she to believe? All the teachings and all the tracts failed to teach her that, and sullenly and stolidly Meg drew within herself, and tried, as best she

could, to grope her way alone and unaided to the light.

If she could only sometimes have seen Miss Stanton; but Nelly now never left the Oaks but to attend church, and Meg shrank from going there, though she had been bidden to do so. The great house, the pompous man-servant, frightened her, and, above all, she had a nervous fear of trespassing too much on the kindness and tenderness that had been shown to her. She shrank from associating with the girls around, and they were shy of her. Her chief companions were Mrs. Potts' children, with whom, especially the baby, she was on the most intimate terms,—her chief delight to steal away from the cottage, carry her pillow to the copse, and sit there and think over every word and look of Eleanor Stanton's, and hope, day after day, that she would see her there again.

But Eleanor never came to the copse, though one day some one did whom Meg had little looked for. It was a bright September morning, and Meg, who had never before seen the country in the glory of its autumn garb, was looking with as much delight as Mary Norton herself could have felt, upon the varied colours of the leaves above her head, and on the brambles round her. She had gathered, in spite of the thorns, a long spray of a blackberry bush—not for the fruit, though the berries it bore were large and ripe, but for the rich tints of its leaves. She had thought them fair enough a month ago, but what was their greenness to the bronze and golden hues on which she now looked. Even the spring flowers that she had so delighted in, would have looked pale and dim by this rich gorgeous colouring.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." Meg remembered having read that line in

one of the books with which Mr. Ensdell had supplied her. Well, she could scarcely say that of these autumn leaves; but at least, their beauty was a great joy for the present, and one that she had never dreamed of before she came to live in the country. Then her mind reverted to him and the dainty home, with all its graceful surroundings, in which he had placed her; and she caught herself wondering if he still lived there, or whether he had found another bird to place in the pretty gilded cage. She very seldom thought of him—never if she could help it; it was so difficult to forgive the wrong he had wrought under his seeming kindness—but she found her mind dwelling on him now, and on the old life in Elma Place. That brief dream of luxury and ease, with the dreary knowledge it had brought, and its pitiful awakening. It came back to her now as she sat with the autumn leaves in her

hands, seeing herself again in her pretty rooms and her dainty dress, with no heavier task than the arranging of her flowers, or conning the books she had loved so well, when a once familiar and well-remembered voice startled her by uttering her name—

"Meg!"

She looked up, and there, in shooting-trim, gun in hand, and dog at his heels, stood Mr. Ensdell. He was looking pleased to see her, so pleased that his usual air of *insouciante* indifference was laid aside, and he repeated in a voice that had something akin to fervour in its tones—

"Meg!"

Her cheeks paled as she saw him. What did he there? He seemed the very embodiment of that vile past from which she had hoped that she had escaped. She could see that, pleased as he was to see her, he took it for granted that she was equally gratified

to see him; for he flung himself down on the grass by her side, and attempting to take her hand in his, said in his old careless, easy tone,

"What a little fool you've been, Meg, to be hiding yourself from me so long!"

She withdrew her hand, and folded both under her shawl; then she looked at him fixedly, and said, "Do you remember, Mr. Ensdell, that the very last thing I asked of you was, that if ever I had the ill fortune to come in your way, you would treat me as a stranger?"

"What ever induced you to write that letter," observed Mr. Ensdell, "is more than I can by any possibility conceive! What on earth had you to complain of? Hadn't I done my very best to anticipate your wishes? Had I failed in anything you had a right to require of me?"

"If you please, Mr. Ensdell, we won't

discuss that. I think my letter was clear enough upon that point," replied Meg coldly; then with a sudden passion, she added, "Can't you imagine—can't you be sure that in all the world you are the last I would wish to see—the one whose very name I would most readily forget?"

"That's rather hard upon me, Margaret, especially as ever since you left me I've been constantly on the look-out for you; but don't mistake me," he added, with a little earnestness, as he saw Meg collecting her work together, with the evident intention of leaving him, "I have no wish to propose a renewal of our former intimacy on exactly the same terms. Of its pleasantness I think there could be no question —of its propriety there might be a little— and, therefore, I ask you, Meg, to become my wife. Ever since you left me I have been on the look-out for you, with the in-

tention of making this peace-offering to your pride, against which our former relationship may perhaps have slightly militated."

This was not, perhaps, quite the truth, but it was sufficiently near it for Mr. Ensdell to feel very magnanimous in his own sight, and to think that he ought to do so in Meg's. He was not surprised to see her look at him with wide open eyes and parted lips, keeping silence for a minute, as if his generosity was almost incredible. Neither did it astonish him very greatly that her first words were—

"You wish to marry me, Mr. Ensdell?"

"Nothing on earth that I desire more ardently." Meg looked so superbly beautiful, that, putting the contingency of her possible heiress-ship out of the question, Mr. Ensdell for the time believed himself in earnest. "Shall it not be so, Margaret? You've tantalized me quite long enough in

hiding as you have done. You owe me some amends—promise to be my wife, and become so the very earliest day possible."

He tried to pass his arm round Meg, but she withdrew herself from him, while the hand which he once more tried to take was still withheld. He had expected to see her overcome by gratitude—perhaps dissolved in tears, which he should have the pleasure of drying; but he was not prepared for the still, unruffled calmness with which she heard him, or the coldness with which she still kept aloof from his grasp or touch. Had Twiss or Sales discovered her, and acquainted her with her possible inheritance? In which case she might hesitate before she agreed to share it with him. But her words when, after a pause, she replied, were sufficient to disabuse him of this idea.

"I never expected you would ask me this, Mr. Ensdell, and I think better of you

for doing so; but it would not be right for me to take you at your word. You would be sorry enough in a little time, if I did, and even marrying you would not undo the past. I don't see that you owe it to me to do so," she added, with a sigh. "I had gone wrong long before I knew you. Rich people know many things, but I think there are very few of them that know what the life of girls in Swamp Town and such places is like. We won't speak of it—I sometimes wish that I could die, just to forget those evil early years. But there would be no reason and no justice in your marrying me, and I think it would be a bad thing for both of us if you did."

"We won't speak of the past, Margaret," said Mr. Ensdell, with unusual earnestness in his tone. "It is over now, and you have done with it for ever. As to the ill-fortune likely to accrue to us from marrying, I

am willing to take my chance of that, and I cannot see that you have much to dread. I think I shall make a very fair husband, and I have little fear of finding a good wife in you. With regard to other people, we need not distress ourselves about them—you will pass muster well enough amongst my friends, and there is not the slightest occasion to let any of them know that you ever heard of such a place as Swamp Town in all your life."

"I was not thinking of all that," replied Meg, looking at him in some surprise. "If I thought I should be doing right in marrying you, and loved you well enough to do it, do you think I should care what other people said or thought? But I don't love you, and I am very sure I never could; and I think, of all sins in the world, to marry without loving is one of the worst."

Mr. Ensdell felt his self-complacency ag-

grieved. Meg looked at him calmly and fearlessly, while she asserted that she did not love him, in tones as unmoved as if she were making the most ordinary assertion possible. He could not help believing her —it was mortifying; but he felt convinced she spoke the truth. Still, he would not give up the hope of winning her—she was so beautiful; and if she did not care for him at the present moment, that was no reason she should not do so in time; therefore he said,

"I don't see that, Meg,—or, if so, the world is full of great sinners. But granted that you don't love me just at present, I really think it's saying too much to assert that you never can do so. I've hardly deserved that at your hands. Come, I'm willing to take my chance of your liking me well enough before you've been my wife a twelvemonth."

"Like you—well, I think I always liked you," said Meg thoughtfully; "but a woman should feel a great deal more than just mere liking for her husband. I think she ought to believe in him as a good man, and one in whom she can trust thoroughly. Now, I never could do that with you, Mr. Ensdell. I left you to lead a better life, and I think it would only be returning to the past, with all its sinfulness, if, feeling as I feel for you, and knowing you as I know you, I were to become your wife."

"Meg, you are a fool!" exclaimed her lover, his placid, easy temper at last aroused by what he thought the girl's incorrigible idiocy. "Don't you see what you're rejecting? Do you think that, even if you've the luck to have the handsomest head on your shoulders that ever a girl was blessed with, such an offer as mine can come to you twice in your life? Don't you see all that

it means—all that your marriage with me includes? I won't say anything of wealth —you might get as much as I could offer in other ways than marriage—but fair fame, good repute, condonation of the past; and with such a past as yours, Meg, do you think you owe the man nothing who is willing to overlook it? Would one man in a thousand 'have done as much for you?—would one in a million? Of all the women in this world, are not you the very last to carp and cavil when I hold out a hand, and reject it on the plea that you cannot respect the owner? Respect!—it is almost a wonder that you ever came to know the meaning of the word!"

He was in a dead white heat of passion. It was so rare for him to be moved below the surface by any feeling, that the emotion when it came completely mastered him. It was not disappointed love that he felt—that

would have been powerless to move him like this—but Meg had wounded him in the very tenderest part—his vanity. He had been refused—and refused by a woman who ought to have gone down in the dust to thank him for trying to raise her from it. It would have been bad enough to have been rejected by her had she been in Nelly Stanton's place, the acknowledged heiress of the Oaks, and with a past unsullied by a thought of evil. But to be disdained by Meg Blount, promoted from a flower-girl to be first an artist's model, and then his mistress, was a trial too great for even Mr. Ensdell's equanimity to bear. So much may be said in excuse—if excuse be possible—for Mr. Ensdell's forgetfulness of those social observances which he had always so punctiliously regarded! It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had ever insulted a woman,—but then it was certainly the first

time that a woman had ever given him such cause of offence as had Meg. She had risen now, and taken up her pillow; she stood quite still while he was speaking—looking at him with a little surprise, but not a shade of anger in her face, which, however, had paled even to the lips when she spoke again.

"If I had ever spoken of respect as due to myself—if I had ever hinted that any one could feel it for me, you might have spoken as you have. As to my past, do I not know that it is such as unfits me for being even your wife? And the misery my becoming so would bring upon us both is best shown by your having spoken of it now. I know all its vileness and its shame—till now I had thought that nothing could be more vile and shameful. I was mistaken; I might sink to a lower depth, a greater degradation than any I have yet known, if I took the hand you offer me, and for the

reasons that you give. You have never understood me, or you would know that it is impossible but that such a marriage would be to me only a greater infamy than when I shared your home before. I sinned then for want of knowledge. My eyes are open now—you may be sure that *so* I will never sin again."

There was no passion in her voice, and no tremor—the only emotion, if any, it betrayed was one of contempt. And it would have been difficult to say how that revealed itself to Mr. Ensdell's perceptions. He must have divined it instinctively. But he felt, as he stood there looking on the woman before him, as perfect in her beauty as any marble that ever immortalized a sculptor, and almost as pale, that she refused him because she felt his utter unworthiness of her. And for awhile, in spite of all the self-complacency and egotism which clothed Mr. Ens-

dell as with proof armour, he felt it too. It was a rapier-thrust, and it came piercing home through all his panoply. This girl, lost from her childhood, the very refuse of the London streets, whose stolid, brute-like ignorance had at first repelled him, in spite of all her beauty, looked on him now as something too mean and false for her acceptance. It was not the voice, scarcely the words, but out of the cold, unflinching eyes the soul which he had himself aroused and cultured looked out, and scorned to ally itself with his. She might be fallen, and in this world irremediably lost, but not the less she looked down on him with an unpitying scorn, against which he felt there was no appeal.

She passed away, and he lost sight of her in the copse. He stood looking after her with a stolid sullen anger, such as he had never felt for any human being yet; and then, when

he could no longer catch a glimpse of her garment, he took up his gun, and whistling for his dog, went moodily towards the Oaks. For that one day, at least, his shooting had been put a stop to.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BEARER OF ILL-NEWS.

MR. ENSDELL was not what might be justly termed a vindictive man; as a rule his loves and hatreds were equally tepid; but Meg had wounded him in his most vulnerable point, his vanity, and his resentment was proportioned to the offence. Still, even had it been in his power, he would have scorned the meanness of taking any active measures for revenge; but he could not bring himself to forego the passive retaliation that lay so ready to his hand, the simply ignoring Meg's existence, and abstaining from acquainting any one with her whereabouts.

Had she acted as she should have done,

had the common sense, to say nothing of the common civility, to accept his hand with the gratitude that befitted such acceptance, it might have been well for her, as for him. If things went so with Mr. Sales' Chancery suit that Nelly Stanton was pronounced illegitimate, it would be far better for all parties that Mr. Stanton's elder daughter should inherit the Oaks; and Mr. Ensdell, while behaving with all due delicacy to Mr. Stanton, would have spared no pains to assert Meg's right to her inheritance. As it was, John Wynde, or any one else, might claim it now for him. If Twiss failed to discover Meg, Mr. Ensdell did not think it incumbent on him to inform her that she was an heiress. Let the thing take its chance. Let her work at lacemaking till her eyes were dimmed and her fingers aching, before he would interest himself in her behalf. He could not bring himself to return good for

evil, and in his opinion Meg had dealt very evilly and very thanklessly by him.

He would go abroad for a time—winter in Italy, as he had long purposed doing, and leave Arnold the task of sustaining Nelly and her father under whatever troubles might befall them. England was insupportable just now; his lodgings at Courtmain Street were full of memories of Meg, and he should never be sure now of not meeting her in the vicinity of the Oaks, if he visited there. And he wished, if possible, neither to meet nor remember her. He should be far better away for a time; and having so resolved, Mr. Ensdell made his preparations accordingly, and in less than a fortnight from the day that had seen him a rejected suitor, stood in the Pitti Gallery at Florence.

Week after week passed on at the Oaks just as the weeks had been passing for months back, only day by day Mr. Stanton

grew, if possible, more fearful for the future—more anxiously, keenly tremulous as to the issue of the Chancery suit. Nelly was even in ignorance that such a suit was pending. Something was wrong; that she had felt and known long ago, but of the precise nature of the evil she was as ignorant as ever. And if it had not been for its effect upon her father's mind, she would have distressed herself very little about it. It seemed so impossible that anything could occur that by any possibility could influence her position seriously, that, had she set herself to work in earnest to conjecture what the possible mishap might be which her father so dreaded, she would have concluded that it might entail some small lessening of income, which would possibly necessitate the giving up a horse or two, or make her wait a little longer for the set of sapphires which her father had promised her on her

presentation at Court. And this would not have grieved her very greatly. The horses now seldom left their stables, she would have said, but for an airing with the grooms; and as to her presentation, that was out of the question in her father's state of health.

October, with its changing leaves and fading flowers, came; and then November, with its bare trees and mists. Christmas would soon be near, and before Christmas came, Arnold Ensdell thought that in all probability it would be decided whether or not Mr. Sales was entitled to his late cousin's dowry.

Mr. Stanton was waiting, waiting, waiting. Sometimes he thought the worst would be better to bear than this suspense—sometimes that, if the worst came, he could not bear the blow. He would have prayed to die before it came, only for Nelly. While he lived there was, at least, a home for her

—if he were taken, there would be nothing but the Rectory walls; and after Mr. Vernon's death—what?

Arnold Ensdell had promised to leave London the moment he was acquainted with the decision of the Court, and acquaint his cousin with the result. This might save a few hours—perhaps a night's suspense, Mr. Stanton thought; and besides, he clung to Arnold now as the only apparent prop left him. Hitherto, they had had so little in common, and perhaps Mr. Stanton had shared to some extent Mr. George Ensdell's supercilious contempt for the unfortunate cadet of the family. But there was no question of that now. Arnold's simple straightforwardness, honour, and sincerity made Mr. Stanton feel that he, at least, was reliable—nay, he had even changed his estimate of him so much as to think that, if he had been at the Chancery instead of the Com-

mon Law Bar, he might have carried this suit to a successful issue. But if it did go against him, he should at least have some one to consult as to the best steps to be taken to make some provision for Nelly, if for the few and evil days remaining to him such provision were possible.

It was the last week before Christmas, and Arnold Ensdell had told him that that week he believed the decision would be given. Monday, and Arnold came not—Tuesday, and the stillness of the Oaks was unbroken by his advent—Wednesday; and just as Mr. Stanton was wearily giving him up for that day, and looking forward to another night and morrow of suspense, he came, and was ushered, as Mr. Stanton had directed he should be, at once into his bedroom. He did not look like the bearer of ill-news; he was grave and composed—but then Arnold Ensdell always was grave, and there

was something almost like elation in his eyes, especially when they fell on Nelly, as she was sitting near the hearth, with the firelight falling on her face and hair. But it was a bad sign that he laid his hand gently upon her shoulder, and said, "Leave us a little while, Nelly; I have come down for a business talk with your father."

If he had good news to communicate, he could have told it in a word; but bad news required more ceremony—such was the inference Mr. Ensdell drew.

He waited till the door was closed, and then looking up with parched lips, said, "Well?"

Arnold looked down very sadly on him. Such a wreck of a man, as he sat there. He was able now to leave his bed for a few hours at a time, and was sitting propped up by pillows by the fire. He was thin and wasted, but the eyes looked twice their for-

mer size as he fixed them on his kinsman, and again said, "Well?"

It was not well, but how was Arnold to tell him so? He had thought over every different mode of "breaking it" that occurred to him on the way down, but how best to do so seemed still as difficult as ever. The man had been false and treacherous—there was no question of that; but his punishment was now to be meted out heavily enough, and Arnold shrank from inflicting it. It was not in him to turn executioner, and therefore he still hesitated; but the hesitation was sufficient. Mr. Stanton interpreted it aright, and buried his face in his white shrunken hands, with a great gasp as if for breath.

After a while he looked up. "Let me know the worst."

"The second marriage is pronounced null and void," said Arnold Ensdell slowly.

"Sales has proved his case completely. There is no question as to the legality of that with Mary Blount, there being ample proof of John Blount's death two days before it took place."

There was silence again. Mr. Stanton sat and looked at the fire in a kind of stupor for awhile. Then he roused himself to say, "And what does Sales take or claim?"

"His late cousin's fortune, with the interest accruing for the last six years."

"I shall have to sell my very furniture to pay it, and then what remains for Nelly? John Wynde has eight children of his own, and he and I have never been on very cordial terms. I can't expect him, when this place falls to him, to show much mercy to my girl. If I could only live just a few years! What are those doctors worth, that they can't eke out a man's days when so much depends upon their doing so! My

little Nelly! nameless and bastardized! and, if I die to-morrow, penniless! Can't you think of something, Arnold? Can't I leave this place, and try and scrape together a few hundreds for my girl? Can't everything be sold off at once, to make some provision for her? Am I bound to ruin her to satisfy Sales' greed? If I must, can't we economise? I may live two years," he added, eagerly. "I think—I do think I've gathered enough from Bright and Hartree to hope for as much as that! How little could we live on in the time? Surely enough to save my girl from beggary! I'd have begun to retrench before, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that this thing would go against me. I couldn't bear that Nelly should know of it till it was impossible to hide it from her; but now the worst has come, I must fight for my life to the last gasp, to make some provision for her. Oh! Nelly, my Nelly,

from such a home as this to be cast adrift upon the world!"

He leaned back exhausted in his chair, and Arnold Ensdell wiped the pale forehead on which the damp hung in bead-like drops, and raised a cordial to the white lips. Even then it was some time before he rallied from his death-like weakness; and when, at last, he did, his first words were, "Arnold, tell me, what shall I do for my girl?"

"Will you give her to me?" said Arnold, slowly and deliberately. "Had she been still the heiress of the Oaks, I should never have asked you for her. I am making headway in the world at last; I may never be able to give her such a home as this, but, at least, I can now offer her a shelter and competence. I have loved her dearly for years, and, with God's blessing, will make her happy. Will you trust her with me?"

Mr. Stanton looked up with a great sur-

prise. This was a thing he had never dreamed of. Arnold Ensdell, the grave barrister, the unsuccessful man—her senior by at least ten years—in love with his May-blossom! But the ill-success seemed passing away, and he spoke of a home and of competence in assured tones. And Mr. Stanton knew that he spoke truthfully. It was not in Arnold Ensdell to do otherwise. And therefore, after a little pause, he took his kinsman's hand, and pressing it with as much warmth as his feebleness permitted, said, "Go and ask her!"

And Arnold Ensdell did.

CHAPTER XII.

SISTER THERESA.

THE sale of Mr. Stanton's horses, the reduction of his establishment, the acknowledged engagement of Miss Stanton to her cousin, might have stirred the stagnant waters of Summerly even more than they did, had it not been that just then that small microcosm of a world had found something else to occupy its attention. Mrs. Winthrop's flight from Summerly, at the very moment when Mrs. Orley was congratulating herself and everybody else upon her cousin's approaching marriage to Mr. Marsh, had given people enough to amuse them for some time in the way of speculation and

surmise; but when Mr. Marsh himself left the village, having announced from the pulpit his determination to join the Elder Church, the whole village was shaken to its very centre, and the break-up at the Oaks, and the bad match Miss Stanton was making, appeared matters of comparatively small importance.

Amongst all the motives which had induced Mr. Marsh at last to give his entire and undivided allegiance to Rome, very few had the charity to give him credit for the real one. Some said that Mrs. Winthrop had jilted him, and he had gone over to Rome in his despair; others that Mary Rachel had refused him, and, disgusted by her rejection, he had vowed himself for life a celibate. Mr. Hubbard was most charitable in his observations when he said that "the poor fellow was tired of halting between two stools, or of wearing

one colour and calling himself by another, and had shown more sense than he had given him credit for, in finding out that it was easier work to be an honest man than he had thought for."

This was very nearly the case. Mr. Marsh was indeed tired of trying to reconcile things whose antagonism is insuperable —of bringing the formulas and rites of one form of worship into another, whose organization from the first had been opposed to them—of galvanizing a puppet, and calling it a resurrection. It was better to go over to Rome at once than to stand half-way between it and the Church of England, and be scouted by the one and derided by the other for his attempt to embody a figment, and induce his flock to believe in it as a religion. And Father Vivian had done something towards this conversion. It had not been pleasant for Mr. Marsh to feel himself

looked down upon as a very humble imitator and a very small pretender. He had fancied himself a dealer in silver wares, and the Father had contrived to let him feel that they were not even electro-plated—only Brummagem—and very poor Brummagem too. And for some time past Mr. Marsh had been carrying on a correspondence with the Father, which had given the latter some amusement, and himself a great deal of trouble. And the end of this correspondence had been that he had professed himself a convert to the Romish Church, and gone down to Waterholme, where Mrs. Winthrop still abided under the shadow of St. Elgitha, and been publicly rebaptized by Father Vivian himself. His reordination was to take place in London, but there was no immediate hurry about the matter. Father Vivian was not particularly proud of his convert, and the Romish

priesthood was in no special haste to enrol him in its ranks; still, as he had left the fold of the English Church for theirs, they were bound, in a manner, not only to give him a welcome, but to find him some sphere of labour in their communion.

Only the welcome would not be a very warm one, nor the work of a very exalted nature. It was quite possible that Mr. Marsh would find, as "perverts" of his calibre had done before him, that at Rome his powers and his importance were estimated by a very different standard to his own.

But another conversion took place about the same time, as Nelly Stanton learned in a letter she received from St. Elgitha's a week before Christmas-day. She was sitting with Mary Norton and Arnold in the little octagon-room when it was brought to her. Mr. Stanton was asleep, and Nelly had just left him in the charge of his nurse to welcome

Arnold, who had arrived but a few minutes before. Mary Norton was debating whether or not she should leave the lovers to their confidences, when Nelly detained her to hear the letter.

"It's from Mrs. Winthrop, I know, and can't have any secrets in it. Arnold, please to read it aloud, for the general benefit."

She gave him the letter, but stood by his chair looking over his shoulder as he read.

"My dearest Eleanor,

"I don't think you will be very much surprised at what I am going to tell you. I have found myself so happy and comfortable while at St. Elgitha's, that I think, on the whole, I cannot do better than remain here for life. Of course I shall have to change my religion, and as that is really a serious affair, I assure you I have given it a great deal of consideration, and

had many conversations on the subject both with the Superior and Father Vivian. The Father thinks I am doing quite right—to use his own words, 'consulting my own happiness both in this world and the next by the step I contemplate.' The Superior is quite of the same opinion, and she is really such a sensible, well-informed person, so full of energy and decision, that since I have been down here, she has been the greatest comfort possible to me. She tells me too—not of course that that has had any effect upon me—that whenever she is removed from the convent, either by death—which I am sure I should be very sorry indeed for—or to another sphere of usefulness—I shall most likely be appointed her successor, especially as I intend to endow the convent with my property. It will be a very responsible situation—a Superior, you know, my dear, is only another name for

Lady Abbess; but I shall do my best to fulfil the duties with due propriety——"

Arnold was interrupted by an outburst from Nelly—"Mrs. Winthrop Lady Abbess! Won't the nuns have a good time of it! Go on, Arnold, do! It's dreadfully interesting. She ought to appoint Mr. Marsh Father Confessor. It's the least she can do after running away from him as she did."

Arnold continued—"I must say I feel a little nervous about taking the veil. It must be rather a trying ceremony to go through; but still it's not as bad as being re-baptized, which really does seem, my dear, treating one just like a baby. How Mr. Marsh at his time of life could go through with it, I cannot imagine; but Father Vivian, who is wonderfully kind and considerate, says that he does not see the necessity for it in my case.

"I have heard from Cordelia—Mrs. Orley, you know—and I am sorry to say she takes a very unkind view of the matter indeed. Her last letter was full of very unpleasant, and if it had been from any one but Cordelia, I should have said very unladylike language, on the subject. But really, the more I consider the point, the more I'm convinced I'm doing the best and most sensible thing possible. For, after all, it's very easy to talk of belonging to the Church of England, but I should like to know now-a-days where the Church is, or in what it consists. I know Cordelia's been Low Church with one Curate, and Broad Church with another; and if she's High Church now, there's no knowing how long that may last. My belief is she'll end by being No Church at all, or else doing as I've done, and looking to the One Church of all, which, as Father Vivian says, is the only

true and infallible one. Only there's one thing, if she does, being a married woman, they wouldn't have her at St. Elgitha's, which, on the whole, is just as well, for I don't think things would go on so pleasantly here as they are doing now, if she was with us.

"I've only seen Mr. Marsh once alone since I came here, and that was just after his baptism. Of course, as he can't marry now, there was nothing said on that subject, only he congratulated me on my vocation very feelingly. On the whole, I think he has quite forgiven my not having married him, and seems to think that it was all for the best. I hope he may find it so, I'm sure. He expects to do great things in the Catholic Church, but it seems to me, my dear, though I'm not much of a judge of such matters, that if there are many such as Father Vivian in it, it will be a long time

before they want to make Mr. Marsh a Cardinal or an Archbishop.

"And now about yourself, my dear Eleanor. I am so sorry to hear that things have turned out so unpleasantly for you. I was never more distressed in my life than when I heard that Mr. Sales had won that very disgraceful Chancery suit he brought against your poor papa. It will make a great difference to you, especially in marrying. And why should you marry? It's a most troublesome life. You'd be a great deal happier here with me, when your poor papa is no longer with you, and I hear his health is getting worse than ever. There need be no difficulty at all about it. I have spoken to Father Vivian and the Superior, and they both agree that you should be received on my account—that is to say, my dear, my property would make things straight for us both. It's very liberal and

nice of them, isn't it? And the dress isn't at all unbecoming—I'm sure it would suit you wonderfully.

"Now, do think over what I've said. I assure you the only thing wanting to complete my happiness is to have you with me. With kind regards and sympathies to your dear papa, and my fondest love to yourself, believe me, yours most affectionately,

"LUCINDA WINTHROP."

"P.S.—This is the last time I shall sign myself by that name. After this I shall be Sister Theresa."

"My goodness!" said Nelly Stanton. "Fancy me a nun! Mary, do you know I think I'll take it into consideration. What do you say, Arnold? Don't you agree with Mrs. Winthrop that there's a deal of trouble in married life? Mary, shall you and I commence our novitiate together? Only,

let Mrs. Winthrop say what she pleases, I've my doubts as to the costume being so becoming. And one wouldn't like to look a fright, would one, even in the eyes of one's Father Confessor, especially if that Father Confessor happened to be Mr. Marsh? And now I come to think of it, it wouldn't do on other accounts. If poor dear Mrs. Winthrop ever is Lady Abbess—Mary, can't you fancy her trying to look the part to perfection?—she'll want some one just to direct her how to direct the nuns, and if I were in the convent, she would be sure to select me as that some one, and I really don't feel quite equal yet to the management of a whole convent. No, it's very good of Mrs. Winthrop, poor dear incapable darling! she means it kindly, too, but I'll write and tell her I can hardly see my way to accepting her offer. I'll put it on the ground of costume."

"Exactly!" observed Mary Norton. "You can tell her there are other veils even more becoming than a nun's."

"But don't let the fear of your responsibilities deter you from entering St. Elgitha's," interposed Arnold. "I think when Father Anselm is appointed Archbishop Manning's successor, Sister Theresa may look forward to becoming Lady Abbess."

"Then I shouldn't find enough work for my superfluous energies, and so perhaps had better stay in the outer world, where there are always incapable people to look after, and impertinent people to keep in order!" observed Nelly, fixing her bright eyes on Arnold Ensdell.

"And Mrs. Winthrop will never be in want of a prop where she is now," said Arnold. "You need have no anxiety about her, Nelly. She will have no occasion to walk alone henceforth. The Catholic Church

is very careful for all such feeble members, and its Father Vivians are very patient and tender with them. I don't suppose she will ever have cause to regret the step she has taken, but I am not so sure about Mr. Marsh. Such neophytes as he are likely to be of little more value to the Church they enter than they were to the one they have left. But it is worth something, too, to feel like an honest man," added Ensdell, thoughtfully. "And what a new experience that must be to Mr. Marsh! Well, in his little way he has done harm enough in his time. I think he has gone where he will, at least, be kept out of mischief."

CHAPTER XIII.

COUNTING THE FEW DAYS LEFT.

ARNOLD ENSDELL was to spend his Christmas at the Oaks; Mary Norton hers in Elma Place. Indeed, she would only return to Summerly on the occasion of Nelly's wedding, which it had been settled should take place in the spring. It was to be so quiet an affair, so totally different from what every one would have anticipated Miss Stanton's wedding should be; so completely in keeping with the new life and the altered prospects opening before the whilome heiress of the Oaks, that Mary Norton seemed a fitter bridesmaid than any of the loftier demoiselles in the neighbouring country houses.

Nelly knew something of the mystery that had weighed on her father, but not its full extent. While he lived, he had implored Arnold Ensdell to keep the knowledge of her illegitimacy from her. If with riper years and maturer knowledge she at length learned *how* it was she had lost all the fair heritage which she had been taught to look upon as her own, so it must be; but in his life at least let the facts be kept from her—let him at least be spared the crowning agony of shrinking from his child's reproaching eyes.

Arnold Ensdell, then, had told his cousin just enough to let her learn that poverty was threatening her in the future, and that there was an absolute necessity for economizing. This Mr. Stanton had insisted on. He had injured her so cruelly, that he must render what reparation he could, and, in the few days that remained to him, make such

slender provision as was possible. He talked of letting the Oaks furnished, and taking up his abode with Nelly after her marriage, in order to reduce his expenditure to the lowest minimum; and it would have been needless cruelty to tell him that the medical men spoke of only one removal as possible for him, and that that must take place so shortly, as to leave Nelly entirely dependent on her husband. It gave him some little comfort to calculate if he lived only two years, how much he might get together. The horses, carriages, pictures, and plate, with what balance he had at his bankers, would pay Sales; and then, in two years, surely he might get together four or five thousand for his girl!

"I shall spend so little, so very little when I'm with you, Arnold; and there'll be the furniture, when I'm gone and the house reverts to Wynde. You ought to get a good

sum for that. Don't tell me it's needless, and she has you to take care of her! Haven't I a right to take care of her too? Am I not her father?—oh! my God! my God! what a father I've been! Arnold, she must know the truth some day—do you think, when she does, she'll curse me?"

It was always the same strain, day after day—what could be done without?—what servant dismissed?—what needless luxury dispensed with?—and so he would sit, with a pencil in his feeble fingers, trying to calculate how much might be got together in the two short years of life that he counted on. Two years!—when twice as many months was the utmost limit that, if he had known all, he had a right to reckon on.

He had done so much wrong to his Nelly; surely—surely a little time might be given him to repair it? But to the other child, to whom he had done a wrong so infinitely

greater, he never seemed to give a thought, till one day Arnold Ensdell ventured to ask him if he did not wish some search to be made for her?

He looked up at him. "Why should I? Do you think, if found, she would be the sister that you would wish your wife to own?"

"I have never looked at the matter in that light. But she certainly might be a sister whom my wife could comfort, and I might help—and God knows in what sore need of help and comfort a girl like that waif and outcast from her cradle may be at the present time."

"You would never find her," replied Mr. Stanton testily. "Ten to one she is dead. You will remember that there has been no talk of any girl residing with the woman who died in Swamp Town, and whom the law courts have thought fit to make out my

lawful wife. Any search for such a one would only cause needless trouble and exposure. You would have a dozen impostors, each asserting her claim to be the real heiress of the Oaks—have this wretched family history the talk of the whole kingdom—make John Wynde, with whom it certainly would be better to be at least on friendly terms, your enemy for life, and add tenfold to the distress and misery I am already enduring—and, Heaven knows, my dear Ensdell, I think there is little occasion to do that!" added Mr. Stanton pathetically.

So the question of the possible existence of another claimant to the Oaks, with a better right to the estate than John Wynde, had been dropped for the present, though Arnold Ensdell felt at times a pang of something like remorse when he looked on the face of his betrothed, and thought that somewhere in the close, reeking streets of the great city—

possibly obscured by sin, tainted by passion, with no sign of innocence or purity remaining, the same face might be seen. Nelly's eyes and Nelly's lips—but eyes that had never known the happy light of girlish innocence—lips that perhaps had long forgotten how to smile, and had never learned to pray.

He would let the miserable man before him spend his few remaining days in peace, and content himself, as soon as he returned to London, with making inquiries in the neighbourhood where his wretched wife had died. If she had had a daughter living at the time of her death, it was possible some clue by which to trace her might be discovered there. It was not the heiress to the Oaks that he was anxious to trace. He had little thought of the difference her existence might, or might not, make to John Wynde. It was Nelly's sister he was an-

xious to discover. Nelly's sister—possibly a wretched fallen thing, the very scum and refuse of the London streets—but Nelly's sister still; and for her sake, and for the sake of the cruel pitiless treatment she had met with even in her cradle, to be tenderly dealt with and saved, if salvation yet were possible, from whatever shame and vileness might be around her.

Nelly had few secrets from her lover—indeed, Nelly had few secrets at all—but of Meg's existence, and her efforts in her behalf, she had never spoken to him. It would have been a difficult thing to have told him that she had befriended his brother's mistress, and helped her in her efforts towards a better life; a subject altogether much easier to speak of when she was his wife. And after his unavailing interference on Meg's behalf with Mr. George Ensdell, her name had never been mentioned between the brothers

—indeed, of her name Arnold was still in ignorance; as ignorant as her father, who had only known her as "baby," was of any she might be bearing at the present time.

They were running so near, the threads of all these lives—so near, and yet so apart. Surely the chance could not be far off that would bring them together—whether for good or for ill, surely they must be interwoven before long.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN OLD FRIEND.

IT was the day before Christmas. Mrs. Potts had taken the two elder boys, and gone to Milford to do her marketing; Mr. Potts was following his ordinary avocations, and Meg remained at home to mind the cottage and take care of the baby. She was working at her pillow, as usual, and the little one, tired with its play, had gone to sleep in the wooden crib by the fireside, leaving Meg to follow out her own thoughts undisturbed by its prattle or its cries.

And these thoughts had mostly reference to the season. Christmas-time—a time that, when Meg had lived in Swamp Town, had

been associated with ideas of unattainable plum-puddings, and festivities in which such as she could have no share. Christmas-time at Summerly seemed somewhat more real, though it by no means fulfilled Meg's ideas of what it should be. In the village, at least, it by no means brought peace on earth, good-will to men, any more than the preceding Christmas had done; for amongst the lower classes, at least, it was always a time prolific in heart-burnings and bickerings. The people on Summerly Common were very liberal with their doles at this season, and the newly-formed sisterhood had been very busy in dispensing them. Mr. Marsh was not there to assist them, and St. Paul's being for the present dependent on weekly "supplies" for its ministrations, there was, of course, no one entitled to take his place in such matters. The Rector had enough to do at his own end of the village,

and even if he had not, would have been of little practical assistance at the other; so the ladies had it all their own way, and the result was a greater amount of grumbling and dissatisfaction than Summerly had known for years, even at Christmas time, when grumbling and dissatisfaction were the normal state of the labouring mind. "The poor"—it was, as I have said, always "the poor" in Summerly, especially since the advent of Mr. Marsh—were so used to be petted, patronized, drilled, catechised, and generally looked after, that they looked for almsgiving as a matter of course, as spoiled children look for cakes and toys, and were about as easy to satisfy as spoiled children generally are. After all, they had some reason on their side—it was a fair bargain between them and the ladies—they dropped their curtseys when they met their superiors, sent their children to Sunday-

school, and, if they did not go to church themselves, at any rate had most virtuously abstained from going to chapel, as long as there was a chapel in the place to go to; and it was only right that all this good behaviour should be remembered to their account, and rewarded accordingly; though it would have been too much to expect from fallible human nature that their ideas of their deservings and those of their benefactresses should correspond.

Mrs. Potts considered herself an injured woman. She had, by her own account, "come off worse than any one of 'em this Christmas, and all just because she couldn't pull as long a face as some folks she knew of, and knew what was due to herself too well not to send the children out clean and tidy, if the cupboard was ever so bare at home. But those always got best off who deserved the least. It was the way of the

world, and had been the way of Summerly specially, ever since she had known it." And so, grumbling and discontented, Mrs. Potts had gone off to Milford, and Meg had remained at home with the baby.

She thought over the troubles and heart-burnings of the little world around her, the well-meaning and ill-doing charity of the ladies, and the shiftlessness, helplessness, and squalor of "the poor," and sadly Meg came to the conclusion that it was all a mistake—life was one great failure from beginning to end; the world was full of misery—all its dwellers were at cross-purposes with one another; and then, as if to contradict her sad, impatient thoughts, the bright image of Nelly Stanton came before her. Meg left off work, laid down her pillow, and sat, chin resting on her hand, looking in the fire, and thinking of the young lady of the Oaks.

She was to be married—so she had been

told—and to Mr. Arnold Ensdell, the grave, quiet gentleman, with the sweet, sad smile, and the tender, pitying manner that she remembered so well. He would make her a good husband, Meg felt sure of that—it was his nature to be kind and gentle to any woman—ah! even to such a one as herself—had he not been so when she was at her lowest?—and what then would he not be to his wife? Meg pictured them in their married home—pictured Nelly with children by her side, and the happy, girlish face beaming with the chastened light and tender love of a mother. Of one thing Meg was very sure—on no child could those eyes ever look more yearning and pitifully than in the hour of her great agony they had looked on her; not even on her husband's could those lips be pressed with greater tenderness than they had once been on hers. Then Meg took out the little purple volume which

held as a guide and an example, was all that she had gathered from its pages.

Church and Chapel alike might have been surprised to learn how little, besides the reality of this life and the beauty of its teachings, Meg's untaught soul had gathered from this book. And in this life the thing which found a readiest response in her untutored heart was the utter unselfishness and the self-forgetting love which had culminated on the cross.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend." How often Meg had repeated those words to herself—even now they came instinctively to her lips as she thought of Eleanor Stanton. What relation or connection could they have with her? Only this, that she had heard of Nelly as likely to lose her inheritance; in what way the village gossips were not clear, but unless she married, it appeared, accord-

ing to them, that trouble and poverty were likely at her father's death to befall the young lady of the Oaks. And before now, when Meg had heard such gossip, it seemed to her as if it would be a blessed thing if by any act of hers the possibility of such suffering could be averted from Eleanor Stanton. Would she not have laid down her life to prevent it? Yes, and gladly—her love was great enough to cause her not to shrink from any sacrifice that might cause Eleanor Stanton's lines to fall only in pleasant places. Her life! ah! it would have been little enough, she sometimes thought, to give back in return for the words which had consoled, and the kiss which had redeemed her. Only it was so valueless—how could anything which she might do ever benefit Eleanor Stanton?

She was aroused from her reverie by a tap at the door, so loud and persistent, that

it nearly woke the "baby" in her cradle. Meg rocked her off, and saying "come in," turned to see who it was that demanded admission. She had not long to wait—the door opened at once, and leaner, shabbier, more soddened-looking than ever, Mr. Twiss entered. He carried his stick jauntily, however, and walked up to Meg with his usual swagger and assumption of gentility. But there was one difference in him. He took off his hat as soon as he had entered, bowing to Meg with a courtesy he had never evinced to her before. He drew near the fire, seated himself, and rubbed his thin hands over the blaze. Then he looked around the room, shaking his head with a mournfully deprecating air, and turning to Meg, observed with a sigh, "I am glad to see you, Miss Margaret—very glad to have that pleasure again, but this is not the place in which I *ought* to see you."

"It is well enough," replied Meg, "I am quite contented; but how did you find me here, Mr. Twiss? And what do you want with me?" she was about to add, but she looked at his patched boots, with soles the thickness of brown paper, his threadbare garment—his one thin coat, so poor a covering on this winter day, his shapeless, battered hat, and made up her mind that, however he had tracked her, his motive had been to ask assistance, and resolved that she would share her slender purse with him.

"How did I find you?" repeated Mr. Twiss. "Ah! Miss Margaret, you don't know the trouble I've had to do it; but I felt it was a duty that I owed you, and I persevered. I was very near giving it up—very near indeed, and it would have been a sad thing for you if I had—a very sad. Indeed, if it had not been through consideration for your interests, I doubt very much whether

I could have gone on as I did—yes, Miss Margaret, I doubt it very much indeed," said Mr. Twiss, looking at her as if to claim her gratitude for his efforts in her behalf. "I was really thinking last night," he continued, "that I must relinquish all hope of finding you, when, by the merest chance, if I may call it so—though I doubt," added Mr. Twiss thoughtfully, "whether we've a right to call anything in this world a chance—I ran last night against Miss Norton. I don't know what made me ask her if she knew anything of you. I had ventured to ask Mrs. Needham as much some months ago, knowing that you had been neighbours in Elma Place, and her reply was not encouraging—decidedly not," said Mr. Twiss emphatically; "but Miss Norton, though she appeared a little disinclined at first to answer my questions, still, when I assured her on my honour—on my honour as a gentleman," added

Mr. Twiss emphatically, "that my motives were only those of the kindliest interest in your behalf, and that in keeping me in ignorance of your present address she would be seriously injuring you, she told me that you were living here; and this morning, though my finances were so low that it was with some difficulty I could pay the railway fare, I started off directly after breakfast, in the hope that I should find you. Need I say, my dear Miss Margaret, how rejoiced I am that I have succeeded, nor how grieved, having found you, that it should be *thus?*" And Mr. Twiss pointed to the lace pillow, and then, with a whole world of contemptuous meaning, waved his hand around the room.

"I am very well satisfied," said Meg. "I am sorry you should have given yourself so much trouble on my account; and why you have done so is more than I can understand."

"Miss Margaret, believe me, once more—my motives were the best and purest. And you can't guess them. No; I suppose Mr. Sales, having taken care of his own rights, has thought little of yours—and you are still in ignorance of them! And you are sitting here making lace for a living, while others are revelling in the wealth that should be yours!

Mr. Twiss drew out an exceedingly dirty pocket-handkerchief and applied it to his eyes; then, after a pause, he said, "Have you seen Mr. Ensdell lately, Miss Margaret?"

Meg turned crimson and then pale. What did he mean by naming that man to her? Was she never—never to be able to leave the past behind? But she answered Mr. Twiss quietly enough. "I have seen Mr. Ensdell once—when he asked me to be his wife—and I told him I would not. Has he sent you here to me?"

"And you didn't have him, Miss Margaret?—you didn't have him?" said Mr. Twiss eagerly. "That showed a rare spirit on your part, under the circumstances—few women would have had so much! But perhaps he told you *why* he asked you, Miss Margaret, eh?" and Mr. Twiss looked at her keenly. "Miss Margaret, you knew what you were about when you said no to him?"

"I knew nothing," replied Meg, with a little anger in her tone, "but that I did not care enough for him to marry him. What else could I know, and what else could he have to tell me?"

"The deception, the falseness, the wickedness of this world!" groaned Mr. Twiss, with uplifted hands—"and he led you to believe, Miss Margaret, that he only wanted to marry you just for your looks, or some reason of the kind? And there is no question, Miss Margaret, that nowhere could he

find a handsomer wife; but still gentlemen like him don't marry girls from Swamp Town merely for their beauty. No offence, Miss Margaret—I'm sure I mean none—but didn't as much as that occur to you yourself?"

"I don't understand you," replied Meg, impatiently. "Please to be quick, and tell me what you mean."

"She don't understand—she knows nothing," repeated Mr. Twiss. "Then, Miss Margaret, it is well that you have an old friend like me to look after your interests a little. They've ill-used me, those I've most benefited—Mr. Sales has shamefully; but I'm not afraid of anything of that kind with you, Miss Margaret. You'll not forget the friend that helped you when you have it in your power to serve him in return. It's a long story, Miss Margaret, but I'll tell it in as few words as possible. Do you remem-

ber, my dear young lady, your late lamented parent's last words?—don't you look surprised at my calling you a lady?—don't you remember that she told you, if you had your rights, you would be one?"

"Yes, but she said strange things at times —poor mother!—I never thought any more of it."

"Ah! they were not too strange to be true, however; she was an ill-used woman —poor lady!—what a deal of injustice and ill-usage there is in this world, Miss Margaret! If you only knew how that Sales has fobbed me off, after all I've done for him; but that's apart from the present question. It's your wrongs and your mother's that I've to deal with now, and, thank heaven, Miss Margaret, your wrongs, at least, I've the power of righting!"

Then Mr. Twiss proceeded to give Margaret an account of her mother's marriage

with a Mr. Ainslie, who had, shortly after Meg's birth, discarded his wife, on the plea that a former husband had been living at the time of the marriage—which plea, thanks to the exertions of Mr. Twiss, had been discovered to be an incorrect one, Mr. Blount having died exactly two days before his wife had given him a successor.

"And if he had done it on purpose, nothing could have been more considerate on his part, Miss Margaret. You can't exactly enter into all the legal points of the case; it is well for you that you have a friend who can do so for you—nay, who has proved that your mother's marriage with Mr. Ainslie was a good one, and got the Chancellor himself to own it, Miss Margaret, and the family themselves to acknowledge it, and who has been hunting for you all over London, Miss Margaret, to tell you, and came down in the country, though he'd hardly money

enough to pay his railway fare, and though circumstances had compelled him to part with his great-coat, and his boots let the water through the soles, because he couldn't bear to keep you in ignorance for a day of your good fortune."

"It's very kind of you," answered Meg, "but I don't see that it makes much difference to me. Even if my father is living—if he sent me from him as a baby, he will scarcely be likely to care much for me now."

"Miss Margaret, that's not the question," replied Mr. Twiss with great earnestness. "Your father must own you now whether he will or not. You are his eldest child, and you don't know what that implies in families of property. What a comfort that you have a friend who does! When Mr. Ainslie parted with your mother, he turned respectable—settled down, and I believe married—not

that that marriage would be good for very much. He took his uncle's name with his uncle's property, and that property is left by the uncle's will, to his nephew's eldest child. Miss Margaret, do you follow me? I repeat, you are that eldest child,—and let Mr. Stanton have as many others as he pleases, while you live not one of them can inherit his estates. Whatever his inclinations may be, you are his heiress, and every penny of his property, whether he likes it or not, must inevitably go to you. I've learned that at least from Mr. Sales; but I wouldn't take his word, after the ungentlemanly way in which he behaved to me, but paid a shilling—a shilling, Miss Margaret, for which I could have found many other uses—at Doctors' Commons, and read the will of Mr. Stanton's uncle—your great-uncle, my dear young lady—for myself, and I find that the good old gentleman has taken care of

your interests as efficiently as your sincerest friend could have desired that he should do. Miss Margaret, let me congratulate you upon being the heiress of the Oaks, and an income that, I am told, cannot be much less than three thousand a year."

"I—I—don't believe it!" gasped Meg, with white lips. "It—it—can't be true! Oh! Mr. Twiss!" she added passionately, "you don't know how dreadful a thing it would be if it were!"

Dreadful?—what did she mean by it? Mr. Twiss looked at her in astonishment. If she had flung the lace pillow in the fire, overturned the cradle, and sprung almost to the ceiling in her delight, he could have understood it. Even hysterics would have been comprehensible, though perhaps awkward; but what did she mean by sitting there with a face as set and pale as marble, and speaking of the good news which he

it all—I will never ask her for a penny. God knows what it would be to me to hear her call me sister once; but even that I will forego, sooner than she should look upon me as a robber and an interloper—or sooner —sooner"—and Meg's paleness was now succeeded by a burning crimson—"than she should feel herself disgraced by me. Her sister!—her sister! had I known it, could I have loved her more dearly than I've done? Had she known it, could she have dealt with me more tenderly and pitifully than she has? Sister!—my sister! If I dared believe it true, and could keep the knowledge as a precious treasure to myself, never to wrong or shame her by."

"But that, my dear Miss Margaret, is just what you can't do," observed Mr. Twiss. "While his eldest daughter is believed to be living, how is it possible for Mr. Stanton to set his second in her place? The Queen

herself couldn't do it. I hear they've been economising at the Oaks. What's that for, but because they know that as soon as the little baby turns up that Mr. Stanton dismissed with her mother nearly twenty years ago, she will take all? And how long do you think it will be before they find out that the little baby has grown into the finest young woman in the kingdom, especially when she has a friend like myself to look after her rights—to say nothing of Mr. Ensdell, who, when he returns from the Continent, where they told me at Courtmain Street he was staying, will be sure to tell his family where they will find their new relation. No, Miss Margaret, your hesitation does you honour—I always said you had the kindest heart I ever knew—but you must take your rightful place. You may be sure of this, that in your lifetime no other child of Mr. Stanton's could ever fill it."

Mr. Twiss did not think it necessary to acquaint Meg with the fact that if her existence still remained unknown, Mr. John Wynde would in due course inherit the Oaks. Indeed, he had troubled himself very little as to whom Mr. Stanton's property would revert to, failing the discovery of his elder daughter; all he had to do was to urge Meg to take her rightful position, or suffer him to assert it for her; and, with this object in view, the more he dwelt upon her utter incapacity to abdicate in favour of her sister, the more likely it seemed to him that he should induce her to take a rational view of matters, and consent to fill her place as heiress-at-law to the Oaks. Meg did not reply at once to his last words. She sat looking intently at the fire for a time, as if trying to realize the new state of things which Mr. Twiss had disclosed. After awhile, however, she replied, "I can't take it—I

can't take it from her! Mr. Twiss, I would rather die than do it!"

"And if you don't take it, Miss Margaret, what good will that do? Mr. Stanton knows that his second daughter is not his heiress, and that while there is any doubt as to his other daughter's being alive, he can neither make her so nor any other child that might be born to him."

Mr. Twiss had learned something about the family at the Oaks, and the late retrenchments, from incidental allusions made to them by Mr. Sales, and from a gossip he had had at the road-side inn where he had stopped to take a little refreshment. But of the exact state of Mr. Stanton's health he was ignorant, and it had occurred to him as just possible that that gentleman might marry once more, with the view of yet securing a legitimate heir, unless the one he had already made her appearance in time

to let him learn that his doing so would be needless. And if he had said as much as this to Meg in the present very Quixotic state of her mind, she might have said that she would still keep in hiding, and let her father make what arrangements he thought best for the preservation of the family honour and interests. Meg was foolishly, weakly generous—it was his duty to her, and his duty to himself as well, to see that she was not led away by her generosity, which would put it out of her power to reward even so old and tried a friend as himself. But upon this very generosity Mr. Twiss now resolved to work, and therefore he continued,

"You might help your sister, you know, Miss Margaret—I am sure you would deal liberally by her; but you cannot give her up the Oaks—you cannot put her in the place that is your own, but I am sure you will do all that is kind and considerate by her; and

what a comfort it must be that you have it in your power to do as much as that."

"And what a comfort it will be to her to have to own me for a sister," replied Meg; "to take benefits from me—from *me*, whose very existence is a disgrace and shame to her!"

"Gently, gently, my dear young lady," remonstrated Mr. Twiss; "you mustn't look at things in that light. If that's all, marry Mr. Ensdell, which will make matters square and pleasant for all parties. And even if you don't take him, when you are installed at the Oaks, who do you think will care to remember anything about Swamp Town? Forget it yourself as fast as possible, and you may be sure nobody else will be in any hurry to remind you of it."

Meg turned from him impatiently. Once or twice he tried to speak, but she motioned him to silence, murmuring, "Let me think

—only let me think." And she sat thinking, trying to evoke some order from the chaos in her mind—to bring into some coherent form the changeful, tumultuous thoughts that were chasing each other there. The baby partly woke, and mechanically she rocked it off to sleep again. Ten minutes passed in this silence, and then she turned to Mr. Twiss.

"Will you go away now, please? I should like to be alone—stay, I think you said something about being short of money —I haven't much, but you're very welcome to this."

She took half a sovereign out of her little purse, and offered it to him. Mr. Twiss did not hesitate for a moment about taking it. "You are very considerate, Miss Margaret; and this *is* acceptable. I wouldn't deprive you of it, but that I feel, in a very short time you will be in a position in which such

a trifle as this will not be a matter of the slightest moment. But I must see you again soon. I can quite appreciate your wish for quiet at the present moment—still you will allow me to call again shortly. When shall it be—to-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow," said Meg decidedly. "That is Christmas-day. If you will come here again, let it be the day after."

"Thank you, Miss Margaret—thank you; I shall not fail. You may be sure I have your interests too much at heart to do so. The day after to-morrow, then? So be it. Good day, Miss Margaret—good day. *Au revoir.*"

With a wave of his hand, and a flourish of the broken cane, which still had the remains of a tassel hanging to it, Mr. Twiss left the cottage, and walked briskly towards the nearest beershop.

CHAPTER XV.

MEG'S CHRISTMAS-EVE.

IT was Christmas-eve, chill, clear, and frosty. Just the evening when carols would resound their loudest in the sharp air, when merry-makers going to their anticipated festivities would, if on foot, move their quickest, rejoicing in the healthy glow of the keen atmosphere, and luxuriating in the thought of the warmth and merriment to which they were hastening. All the country was white with hoar frost, and the moon was high and full in the heavens. It was cold—very cold. Mrs. Potts' children had gathered round the fire below,

and were roasting chestnuts. Mrs. Potts herself had asked Meg to join them; but, cold as it was, the girl preferred to remain alone, and was now kneeling by her window, looking sometimes up to the sky above, with its myriad stars and its fair pale moon; and then on the white world below on which they were shining, and whose outlines were almost as clear as in the day.

She had recovered a little from the first bewilderment into which Mr. Twiss's revelation had thrown her, and was beginning more fully to realize its importance both to herself and to others—to Eleanor Stanton above all. It seemed clear, by what he said, that she, Meg, was, by the very fact of her living, defrauding another of the rights to which she had been in a manner born, and that other was the one whom, of all the world, she would least willingly have injured. She felt no elation at the wealth pro-

mised her; it had come too late—what could it give her now? Nay, it would be worse than useless if she could only obtain it by supplanting the sister whom, even before she had known her to be such, she had so loved. And how could she make this wrong right? How could she prevent herself being at least a passive agent in that wrong? It seemed clear that hiding herself away would not answer the purpose. According to Mr. Twiss, there would always then be a doubt in men's minds as to whether Nelly really was the rightful heiress to the Oaks, or whether, at some time or another, her elder sister might not be forthcoming to supplant her. Was there no way of remedying the accident of birth, and making Nelly Stanton the elder daughter of her father's house? No way of rectifying the wrong that she, Meg, so unwittingly had done her, and restoring her to her rightful

place and position? It might be possible to divide the inheritance; but Meg had dim vague ideas of the law's potency, and was not sure how far that would be permitted. And if it were, it could only be by her taking, to some extent, her place as heiress; and was it from such hands as hers that Eleanor Stanton was to stoop to receive her birthright? Should she have cause to blush for the sister whose beneficence humbled her? Meg's own pride revolted at the idea. She was proud for herself, and for her sister too; if she could help it, that sister should suffer no such shame through her. There was a way out—there surely was a way—and she would find it before long. Undivided, and without a shadow of disgrace at having to take it from unworthy hands, the Oaks, and all the fair estate around, should pass to Nelly Stanton, and she should live in it—she and her chil-

dren after her. Meg smiled at the thought. Nelly and her children—softly she called her Nelly, as she had heard her called by her father and Arnold Ensdell that day in the studio.

"Nelly, Sister Nelly." She said it scarcely above her breath, for fear any one in the house passing her door might overhear her; then she took out the glove, and the little purple book, and kissed each over and over again, murmuring over them, "They were from my sister—my sister Nelly—Sister Nelly gave them to me."

Ah! if they had only lived as sisters from their childhood!—to have played by day and slept by night together! Not two years between them in their ages, but what a century of sad experience! If she could only once fold her sister in her arms, and give her once a sister's kiss; and then—then find a path out of all this maze of trou-

ble, and leave Nelly to live her life unshadowed and unshamed.

She *must* see Nelly once—she could not tread that path without gathering some courage from her sister's voice and lips. She would try to do so the next day; she would meet her, waylay her on her road from church, and then speak to her. She would tell her nothing to lead her to guess at their relationship; she would be sure to be tender, and gentle, and pitiful, without such knowledge, and the having it might cause her to shrink away.

"And I could not bear *that*," thought Meg. "I should have no right to blame her, but it would be very hard to see her turn from me. I suppose she must know all in time, but—but she won't shrink from me then; she will learn that I did my very best to atone to her for the shame of having such a sister."

To the father, of whose existence she had that day heard, Meg scarcely gave a thought; she had instinctively set him down as on a par with Mr. Ensdell. They were akin in more things than their relationship, and she smiled half scornfully as she thought of the motive which had prompted the amend the latter had offered her, and her own rejection of it. Thank God, for that sweet sister's sake, she had acted as she did! It was now in her hands alone to give her back her birthright.

No jealous feeling—no bitterness against the girl who all these years had held the place that should have been hers by rights, once disturbed her. If things had been but otherwise—if they had lived as happy children, and grown into stainless maidenhood together, how different her life might have been! Oh! from the first to have been reared as Nelly's sister should have been!

But as this had not been, she would never shame her now. She looked upon herself as the usurper and the interloper, unless she took that one step which would prevent the possibility of her so wronging Eleanor. She thought over it persistently—followed it out in its minutest details, and at last left the window, and lighting her candle, sat down and wrote.

Her letter finished, she folded it carefully, and tied it up with the little well-read purple volume, then directed it. She had taken out the grey kid glove, and hesitated whether she should enclose that in the parcel; but after a while put it back in the little bag which she always wore inside her dress—kissing it first, and murmuring—

"I may keep this to the last."

After a while she lay down to sleep, leaving her curtains still undrawn, that the moon and the stars might shine upon her;

and now and then, before she closed her eyes, she repeated softly—"Sister—sister—" and once, more softly still, "Greater love none can have than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friend."

Then her eyes closed, and never yet had the moon, which shone in upon her, looked on a calmer sleep or a happier smile than she saw that night in the little attic.

If the step she proposed taking led her to such peace as its mere thought had brought her, would it not be well for her at last?

CHAPTER XVI.

AS SISTER UNTO SISTER.

IT was Christmas morning, and Nelly Stanton had started with her lover towards the old Church of St. Mary's. There was no question of riding, for neither carriage nor horse remained in the stables; but walking this clear, bright day, with the sun shining down on the crisp frosty ground, was something infinitely preferable. Nelly was too full of happiness not to be even saucier than usual. Arnold was her own—her own—her very own at last, and she had a right to tease him as much as she pleased.

She was radiantly happy this day. Only a twelvemonth ago, and she had walked by

Arnold's side to the same church, feeling that he looked upon her as a child, and angry with herself for being so looked upon, and wondering whether the time would ever come that he would regard her as something beside his little cousin. And it had come now!—she was loved at last—she was a queen come into her kingdom, and her kingdom was Arnold's heart. She was no longer the heiress that she had been; how or why this change had come, she knew not, but the wealth which she had always considered hers as a matter of course, had passed away like a dream, and she was to begin life, if not exactly as a poor man's bride, still in a home very different from any that, but a few years ago, could have been anticipated for her.

What did it matter? Had she not Arnold? Had she not his love?—had not God given her infinitely more than he had

taken away? The small house in the London street, the little economies she would have to practise, the luxuries to relinquish, what did it all matter if she had him to work and save for. Nay, there would be the delight of working for him—of doing a thousand things that, if they had been rich people, she would have been debarred the privilege of doing. What would the loss of all the wealth in the world matter when she had so much to rejoice in and be thankful over?

She was so full of her happiness, that it overflowed in a thousand little petulances, and wilful words and ways. She loved Arnold so very much, that she felt as if she had a right to tease and perplex him a little, just a little, to try and hide from him how completely he had mastered her. May be, Arnold was not much deceived after all—he had grown wiser in many things that con-

cerned his cousin lately—perhaps he understood the meaning of every wilful word and look, better even than did Nelly herself.

She looked brighter, prettier, daintier than ever that day, in her pretty winter dress, with the tiny morsel of black velvet which the milliner had called a bonnet on her head, and which seemed placed there for no other purpose but to contrast with the thick chestnut hair coiled below it. So Arnold thought, as his eyes rested on her while they sat in the old pew, with its curtains well drawn back. There was no one likely to sleep there that morning, let the Rector's sermon be ever so drowsy. The old Rector, as he ascended the pulpit, felt, as he glanced at the bright young face before him, that he should miss it sorely when it no longer beamed on him, as it had done Sunday after Sunday for so many years, changing in that time from the sweet unconsciousness of its

rosy childhood, to the tenderer bloom and the softer light that maidenhood, with its dreams of love, had brought.

Other eyes than the Rector's or Arnold Ensdell's were looking lovingly on. In a seat in the far corner of the church sat a quietly-dressed woman, young, to judge by her figure, for of the face nothing could be seen, owing to the thick Shetland veil drawn down before it. She had come there early —as soon as the church was opened—and she sat there now with her eyes fixed on the face of Eleanor Stanton. She knelt when others knelt, stood up when others stood, but she said her own prayers, thought her own thoughts, with little regard to the feeble voice of the Rector, or the open prayer-book before her.

It may be she had come there less to worship the One Lord of Heaven and Earth, than the idol she had made unto herself,

and before whom, night and day, she had bent with a love that was adoration. Let us not blame her, this poor Pagan, fighting her own way alone and unaided to the light, if the goodness, and the purity, and the tenderness, which had come to her embodied in a girl's sweet face, had won a devotion than which a deeper could scarcely have been felt by a martyr at the stake for Him in whose cause he believed himself called to die.

Meg was ready to be a martyr too. She had her faith, and would shrink from no sacrifice that it required. And for this sacrifice she had now come to gather strength.

And Nelly sat there, the one bright bit of colour and beauty in the old church, which had not even the usual Christmas garniture of holly. The Rector's righteous wrath against the wrong-doings of Mr. Marsh and his sisterhood had caused him to forbid even the

slight attempts at decoration the pew-opener and sexton had performed in other years. She sat there, lightening the whole church with her sweet presence, unconscious what eager eyes were devouring her every look, and drinking in memories of her girlish beauty, with its changeful expressions, and varying blooms, to carry away—whither?

Nelly had sent her Christmas offering of flowers, as usual, to Mrs. Vernon, and, when the service was over, did as she had done the last year, took her cousin with her to the Rectory, and leaving him in the dining-room below, ran up to the invalid's chamber. There was little difference, either in Mrs. Vernon herself or her surroundings, between this and the last Christmas-day. She might be a little paler, a little thinner, but the change, if any, was almost imperceptible. She had the same glad smile of welcome for her young friend, but there was

a deeper tenderness, a tenderness with a latent meaning in it, in the kisses which she pressed upon her cheek.

"Nelly! my darling, I am so glad—this is the first time I have seen you since I heard of your engagement—I wish you joy, and I've wished it already a thousand times, my pet!"

"*Maman*, I am so happy, so very, very happy. I never thought—it seemed as if Arnold couldn't care for me—I was like a child to him, and he so clever and so good. There it is—he is so good, *maman*, I feel I can trust my life with him—I feel so safe, so sure, let what will happen, no *real* trouble can ever come. We may be poor—I don't understand all these law troubles, but I don't care for them either. What does all the money in the world matter, so long as Arnold loves me and I love him?"

"Not very much, my darling; you have

that treasure beyond all price—the one love of a good man's heart. I am unselfish in rejoicing in your happiness, Nelly," added Mrs. Vernon, with a faint smile, "for it had seemed at first as if by and by God intended to give us a daughter in our old age. We should have been glad to have welcomed you to these old walls, Nelly, when you had no other home; but it is better as it is —you will have a safer shelter even than ours could have been. You will come and see us as often as you can; and if there are any in the village you want 'specially looked after——"

"*Maman*, there is one," interrupted Nelly, hastily; "not that I have seen to her as much as I would have wished myself. You see, with poor papa, how could I? But when I am gone, if Mr. Vernon would call on her, and if you wouldn't mind, bring her to see you—I mean the poor girl who made

those lace caps for you. How pleased I am to see you wearing one to-day! I never told you all her story—I'm afraid it has been a very sad one—the very saddest one that could be told. She went wrong, *maman*, for want of knowing right," said Nelly, very softly, with downcast eyes; "some day I must come and tell you all about her. You will not be hard upon her? Oh! *maman*, how terrible it must be not to know the right until it is too late!"

"You should have told me of her sooner, dear," said Mrs. Vernon; "but there, you have had so many troubles, and I can do so little. What is her name? You may be sure I will do my best for her."

"Margaret Blount—she cannot be more than twenty now; and she is so beautiful—I never saw such a face as hers."

"Margaret Blount," repeated Mrs. Ver-

non, thoughtfully—"Blount, and twenty years! Nelly, where does she live? I will tell the Rector of her. He shall go to her to-morrow. My child! my child! why didn't you tell me this long ago?"

Blount—it was the very name, as Mrs. Vernon knew, that had been borne by Mr. Stanton's first wife. She had heard the whole sad story from the Rector, and now it seemed just possible that some mysterious chance had brought the discarded daughter into contact with her favoured sister. Could it be so?—and was Nelly's sister a fallen thing, only to be spoken of as Nelly had just now spoken, with lowered voice and crimsoned cheek? If she were still living, what else could be looked for? Poor outcast! condemned by her very father to perdition! Thank God for the divine pity that had prompted the unstained girl before her to whisper what hope and comfort she could

to the poor soul that in its ignorance had gone astray!

"My darling," Mrs. Vernon continued, after a pause, "could you bring this poor girl to me to-morrow? Leave your father for once—I should not ask you without good cause—and bring her to me yourself. Oh! my pet, my helplessness chafes me so at times! Here has this poor girl been months in the village, and I have never been able to see or speak to her? Bring her to me to-morrow, dear, if possible."

Nelly promised to do so. Mrs. Vernon seemed unusually disquieted about her—so much so, that a nervous feverishness had taken the place of her usually placid gentleness.

Nelly left her shortly, not without receiving reiterated injunctions to bring Margaret Blount the next day, and rejoined Arnold. She was so much stiller than in the early

part of the morning, that he noticed it.

"Nelly, is it church or Mrs. Vernon that has calmed you down so wonderfully? The well-behaved, decorous young lady walking by my side is quite a new acquaintance."

"*Don't* laugh at me, Arnold—Mrs. Vernon is so good."

"Poor lady!—what a complaint to bring against her!"

"Don't laugh at *me*, Arnold—I won't put up with it!" flashed forth Nelly; "and some things she has said have been very nice and kind, and others have vexed me a little, and puzzled me a great deal. You needn't look interested, sir; we were not talking about you by any means all the time I was with her, and—and don't tease me, Arnold," she pleaded, plaintively. "I don't much mind it at other times, for you're not particularly clever at badinage, but just now I'm not at all in the humour for it, and feel

very weak and defenceless. You'll have it all your own way, if you do, and it's a shame to hit, isn't it, when one can't be hit back again?"

They walked on silently together through the lanes, on whose leafless hedges the traces of the white hoar-frost yet lingered, sparkling in the sun. As they turned a corner, they saw a female figure standing under a tree a little way before them. Nelly started. "How strange!—the very girl Mrs. Vernon asked me to take to see her!"

Arnold recognised her; he was a good man, and very tender towards all women, but he did not quite like his Nelly appearing to know this girl so well. He would have done a great deal to help Meg himself, but he would rather Nelly knew nothing of her. It was only the thought of a moment —the next he was blaming himself for hav-

ing yielded to it; but the shade which had passed over his face as Nelly spoke had been perceived by Meg, and comprehended.

"He is very good—very good," she thought, "but he would not like his wife to have such as I for her sister."

She came up to Nelly. "I have come to say good-bye, Miss Stanton; I am going away from here. You will never see me again. I have very much to thank you for —will you let me do it now?"

"Going!—going!" cried Nelly, impatiently. "This is very sudden—and to-day, too, of all days! You must not leave us like this. I have promised a dear friend to take you to her to-morrow. Won't you stay for that? And why should you go at all? Has any one been unkind to you?—has anything vexed you? Can I help you in any way? Only tell me."

Meg shook her head. "I wish to go.

Believe me, I have good reasons for doing so. No one has been unkind—I have nothing to blame any one for—but I must go?"

She was very pale—she had evidently nerved herself up for this interview, and Arnold was sure that it cost her a great effort to maintain her calmness during it. She had a small parcel in her hand, and she offered it to Nelly.

"It would take too long now to tell you *why* I am going; but I thought it would be best that you should know—I think—I hope—that when you do know, you will say I have done what was right. I only ask you to believe in me now for a little while. Don't open this parcel till to-night. I should like you to read what I have written quietly, and alone. Will you promise me?"

Nelly bowed her head in assent.

"And—and—one thing more—" The

girl's firmness seemed failing her now. The tears were welling up in the dark eyes, and the lips quivering. "I am going to ask you a great kindness, I hope you'll not be angry with me,—but that I am sure you will not —*you* could not be angry with anyone. You kissed me once. I think but for that kiss I should not be living now. If—if you would let me kiss you once again—once—just once—oh! don't—don't blame me, sir, if I'm asking her too much—" she turned with streaming eyes to Arnold—"will you—you, her promised husband, let me kiss her—as —as—one sister might another?"

The words came out with a great gasp, and she was bending forward—almost kneeling before Arnold as he uttered them. And he—he did what to this day he thanks God for having given him grace to do—raised the poor suppliant, and led her to his betrothed.

Should sisters' kisses be so full of passion-

ate despair as were those that now were rained on Nelly Stanton's lips, and did Arnold's ears deceive him, or did he hear such broken words indeed poured forth as "Nelly—sister—sister Nelly!"

Another moment and Meg stood almost as calm as usual before them both. She turned to Arnold. "Thank you, and bless you, sir; you have not despised me, and been angry with her because she did not do so! You know nearly all my story—I think some day, when you know it *quite* all, you will not be sorry that you have not done so. Good-bye, my journey is a very long one. It is time that it was begun."

CHAPTER XVII.

FOR *THIS* LIFE—LOST.

"NELLY—I wish I had followed that girl," said Arnold Ensdell thoughtfully. "There is a look in her eyes that seems to me as if it could have but one meaning. God forbid, my darling, that I should have read it rightly. Has she any friends in this place?—and how came you to know her?"

Then Nelly described the interview in the study, in as few words as possible; but the tears were in Arnold Ensdell's eyes before she had concluded, and he drew her to him with—"God bless you, Nelly!"

She went on to speak of her meeting Meg

in the copse, saying, "You can have no notion, Arnold, how beautiful she looked sitting there. Mary Norton has often said she never saw a finer face than Margaret Blount's——"

He stopped her, and bade her repeat the name; and the same thought flashed on his mind that had on Mrs. Vernon's. "Margaret *Blount!* Nelly, oh! my poor child, if this should be as I fear!"

"What do you mean, Arnold?—what is there in her name that should startle you as well as Mrs. Vernon? What mystery can there be about this poor unhappy girl?"

"I cannot tell you, Nelly—it may be only a wild suspicion on my part—but that look in her eyes!—and *what* journey should she be thinking of so suddenly? Nelly, I must see that parcel which she gave you."

"Arnold! she said it was not to be opened till to-night."

"No matter; give it me. Nelly, must I tell you what I dread? That it may be life or death to this girl to find out who she is at once, and follow her."

Nelly gave him the little packet without another word; he opened it, and she saw the book which a few months before she had given Meg, and a letter.

"You will let me read this, Nelly?" and without waiting for an answer Arnold opened it.

A few lines were enough. He had read the meaning of those mournful eyes aright. Nelly started at the ashy paleness of his face, but he withheld the letter.

"You must not read it *yet*, my child," he said, putting her gently from him. "Go home, and get ready for a guest—I may bring you one, God willing, before long."

Another moment, and he was striding over the frozen ground with a speed which

Nelly had never seen him exercise before—a speed that seemed as if dear life depended on it—as dear life did.

"My God!—my God!" he murmured, "why did I not stop her? What a mad fool I was not to understand her meaning rightly! Nelly's sister, and fling her life away like this! Are all the wrongs that others have inflicted on her from her birth, to culminate in this great wrong done by herself?"

I think at that moment Arnold Ensdell would have given up his love to have been assured of the safety of the girl whom but twenty minutes sooner he had almost thought unfit to come in contact with her. On he went, walking at such a pace, that cold as was the day, the great drops stood on his forehead. It was a race that he was running—a race with Death—and which should be the gainer?"

He knew that to a girl trained like Meg one mode of voluntary death would be most familiar and least terrible. Possibly before now, in the evil days of her London life, she had stood on any one of the bridges that spanned the river, and looking over at the dark stream, consulted with herself whether it would not be best to take one leap, and so end all? There was no river near, but there were pools, chill, dark, and deep enough to absorb the young life flung into their waters; and to one of these, the nearest, he bent his steps.

It lay a little distance from the road-side, in a field where, when Mr. Stanton had kept horses, they had often been turned in to pasture. The osiers grew thick and high on its borders, and in the sultry summer the cattle came and stood amongst them, knee deep in its waters. It was shallow enough at its margin, but the centre, years ago, had

served as the completion of more than one rustic tragedy—would it do so again?

It had not yet at least. A thin coating of ice covered the surface of the water, and this was quite unbroken. No despairing girl had forced her way through it to the chill rest that lay beneath.

Then he paused and took counsel, blaming himself for his rashness in coming to so hasty a conclusion. If after all he had not read that letter rightly, and its writer had merely gone from the neighbourhood for awhile. The thought came like a gleam of sunshine on his soul, but it was sunshine quickly chased away. He could *not* have misinterpreted that letter—he could *not* have misunderstood the meaning of those eyes, nor the set, firm purpose written in the face. Where should he seek her now?—perhaps she had already completed her purpose, and was lying stiff, stark, and chill be-

neath some other waters, as cold and deep as those he was now looking on; or the young life might be ebbing away, and triumphing in the mistaken self-sacrifice which its love had dictated.

O God!—to prevent the completion of that sacrifice—to save such a soul from winging its flight away before it had learned the wealth of love awaiting it—the veil that tender hands were so ready to fling over all the troubled past—the sympathy, the pity which other hearts were yearning to pour, like oil and wine, into the wounds of its own poor tortured one.

What to do next?—where would Meg most likely have flown when she had left them?—such a little while ago—such a little while—yet long enough for her to have crossed the bridge between Time and Eternity! Such a little while, but the long, long journey she had spoken of might have

been completed by this. Then he remembered a pool on the opposite side of the Oaks estate—Meg might have gained it by taking a circuitous route; it was a spot far more likely for her to seek with such a purpose as she had in view than the one where he now stood. At the outskirts of the plantations, but screened by the hedge and the steep fern-covered bank from the gaze of pedestrians, lying down in a hollow half-hidden by tall, dark firs, whose branches almost met above, with thick moss growing on its borders, where the tangled brushwood did not intervene, was a still, dark pool—a pool Arnold had never looked at without half a shudder; it had seemed to him so often as if it must hold what he was now looking for—the white, set face of a dead girl!

Through the fields he went towards it—if she had gone by the road, he might yet

be in time. It was a vague, faint hope—just the hope that is so akin to despair. He forced his way through the hedges—anything to save a moment's time, which taking the stiles would have cost him. Then he gained the plantation, and pushing his way through the brambles, stood at last flushed and breathless by the pool, looking down so eagerly for that which it would have been so terrible to see.

No, the waters did not hold her. He drew one long, deep breath of relief—but another look told him something of an unusual nature had taken place there. The ice was broken in small pieces, and there were the marks of footsteps, some of them evidently those of men, and the brambles were broken away in different places. What could it all mean? Had the unhappy girl sought her death here, and even in this lonely spot had some one been near enough

to step between her and her purpose?

What should he do next? Perhaps the best thing would be to go to the Oaks at once, and ask Nelly where Meg had been living while in the village. Then he would go there and see if he could discover any traces of her. Or, if things were as the appearance of the pool led him to imagine, he might hear something of her in the village. Possibly she might have been rescued in time, and Nelly and he might yet have the joy of teaching her how dear and precious they held their sister.

He walked quickly towards the Oaks. The hall door was open, and something in the general atmosphere of the house struck Arnold as differing from its usual stately calmness. There were traces of muddy feet, and the droppings of water on the tesselated pavement of the hall. Had they brought her *here*, and so anticipated his purpose?

Had she come to her home at last—and *how?*

That day Mr. Stanton had been so much better that he had insisted on being carried down into the dining-room. This opened on to the hall, and Arnold Ensdell now heard his voice in a tone of angry complaint.

"This is intolerable, sir—intolerable! Was there no way-side inn that would have afforded her shelter?—no cottage at hand where they could have given the unhappy wretch such accommodation as befitted her? But you must thrust her here—here, sir—desecrate my roof—the roof, sir, that shelters my daughter—by bringing a creature beneath it abandoned enough to fling her life away. Don't tell me, sir! None *but* the abandoned do such things!"

Ensdell entered the room. Mr. Stanton was by the fire, propped up with pillows, but in full dinner costume. He had made a great effort in honour of the day. Oppo-

site to him, looking, in his pinched, threadbare imitation of gentility, as great a contrast as well could be to the *soigné*, elaborately-got-up invalid before him, sat Mr. Twiss. He was more limp, threadbare, and wretched than ever—wet, too, above his knees, and not even his stick to comfort him; but there was something of a defiant spirit in the man's eyes, as he listened to Mr. Stanton's maunderings, that was not wholly born of gin and water.

"Look, sir, I brought her here," he said, "because it was the only fit place for her. I'd followed her about all the morning, for I mistrusted her. It's not the first time I've seen a woman's face when she's had *that* in view, and I've learned to know it. Why she should have done it, God knows—I don't—perhaps she thought she wouldn't live to be scouted by you. Poor soul! one can't tell. But when I'd got help, do you

think *then* it was the time to stop and as
where I should take her, when the men wh
had brought her to dry land told me th
house was at hand—this house, sir, which
knew to be her rightful home. Ah! yo
may look—I've proof upon proof, if nee
be, that the girl lying upstairs is as muc
your child as the one you forbade to hel
her when she was brought into this hous
My name is Twiss—sir—Twiss—I thin
you've reason to know it, though I've neve
had the pleasure of seeing you before—an
I know that Margaret Blount, as she h
been called for years, is your late wife
daughter, and your only legitimate child."

Mr. Stanton caught sight of Arnold's fa
—"Ensdell, Ensdell, what does he mean

"It's true, sir," retorted Twiss, turning
Arnold. "Here's the certificate of her ba
tism—here's—I've plenty of other proofs,
need be—witnesses by the score, who kne

that the late Mrs. Stanton—we'll give her her own name, sir, in her own home, if you please—always spoke of Margaret as the only child she had ever had, and one of those witnesses, sir, believed the story sufficiently to make Miss Margaret, not so long ago, an offer of his hand. She had the good sense and the spirit to reject him; but I think you must know Mr. George Ensdell well enough to believe that he would *not* have made such an offer to a girl of Miss Margaret's very unhappy antecedents, had he not had good reason for so doing."

"It—it—can't be—I don't believe it; Ensdell, do you?" said Mr. Stanton, turning feebly to his kinsman.

"Yes," answered Arnold gravely. "From my soul, sir, I believe that this man's tale is true."

Nelly Stanton had left the upstairs chamber at the doctor's bidding. Not without

his using some peremptoriness—and she had come down to soothe the father whom she had so recently disobeyed by having the poor waif received not only into the house, but carried to her own chamber. She had stood an unnoticed listener for the last few minutes, and now came forward with a face as white as that of the drowned girl up-stairs, and laying her hand on his arm, said,

"Arnold, do you tell me that Margaret Blount is my father's daughter—and my sister?"

"Yes, Nelly, and a sister for whom you need feel no shame—to whom you may give as much love as you will, if she only lives to claim it."

"Oh! Arnold, pray to God she may!" And Nelly softly hid her face in her hands.

"Ensdell, are you mad? Such—such a girl to be the mistress here! If she lives, what could the life have been for which she

sought such an ending!" said Mr. Stanton, impatiently.

Never once yet had Arnold Ensdell spoken sternly or harshly to the wretched feebleness before him, but his patience was overmastered now.

"I think such an ending, sir, prompted by such motives, would have been a worthy crowning to a nobler life than either you or I have led. Nelly, my darling"—he laid his hand tenderly upon her—"this letter is yours of right. If your sister lives, it may teach you how to prize her. May I read it aloud? I think, in justice to her, your father and hers should hear it."

Nelly signed assent, and Arnold read:—

"My Sister—my own dear—dearest—most beloved Sister,—It is only to-day I have learned I have a right to call you so, and yet I cannot tell you how full my heart has been of love towards you from the very first time I

looked upon your face; but I cannot rejoice in the knowledge, for you would be ashamed to own me as your sister; and I am told, too, that I may possibly in some way injure and supplant you, that the riches which you have always looked upon as yours by right are mine, and that while I live they can never rightfully belong to you. I—I—am to rob and injure you—you, whom I would do anything to serve—you, whom I have loved as I have never yet loved anything in all the world!

"But, my dearest, I will not do this—I will not live that you should be disgraced by me—I will not live to injure you in that or any manner. It would be such a thankless return for all that you have done for me, and it will make me so happy to think that I am giving back a little—just a little—for all the good that you have done me. Do you remember that time you kissed me?

You don't know what you saved me from then. I think I should have been at rest in the dark river long before this, but for the memory of that. I don't think I could have lived, and thought of all I had lost, and all I might have been, if it had not been for the thought that even lips so pure as yours had not thought it unworthy of them to kiss mine. I felt in that moment I could have given my life for you a thousand times. My dearest, I am going to give it once—just once. I shall find some quiet, deep, dark pool, and lay myself down in it, with the thought to hush me off like a lullaby that you will be the richer and the happier for what I do.

"I give you back the little book you gave me. I have read it so often—it is so beautiful; but, my dearest, if I had not known you, I should have thought it all a lie. It is so different—so different from all that I

see in the world. Only it must be true and good, or you would not believe it; and there are some words that ever since yesterday have been ringing in my ears, as if to tell me what to do, and how to prove the love I bear you. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' Oh! my darling, when I thought of laying down my life for you, I understood them all, and I do it now—oh! so gladly and so willingly.

"And now good-bye, my own—own dearest. Think of me a little—just a little—only not sorrowfully. I think the greatest joy my life has ever known has been the thought that I could lay it down for you.

"I shall not shame your name by taking it just this once. You will not be angry with me, if for the first time and the last I call myself your Sister,

"MARGARET STANTON."

Nelly was kneeling on the ground, sobbing away in the wild grief of a young heart, to whom sorrow is so new and strange a thing. She understood nothing but that this sister, one moment found, only perhaps to be lost the next, had loved her well enough to cast her life away for her. How or in what way that sister's life or death could make a difference to her she never cared to guess, nor why all these years it had been hidden from her that she had a sister. The love which had been so lavishly poured forth, and the loss which was impending, were enough for her to realize.

Presently in came Dr. Hartree. Fortunately, as it had seemed to Nelly at the time, he had been paying his usual visit to Mr. Stanton, when this new case claimed his care. Nelly had had her own way in having the cold white form, that had been borne into the house on men's shoulders,

placed in her own chamber—the doctor had had his, after a time, in dismissing her from it. He dreaded the worst when he did so—nay, he had dreaded it from the first. Those waxen lips would never know the breath of life again; the light and the darkness would be the same henceforth to those fixed eyes.

He had done his best, and the girl ought not to have succumbed. According to Mr. Twiss, she had been such a few minutes in the water—only while he was obtaining help, for which he had not to seek very far; but she had gone down deliberately to die. There had been no struggle—he had seen her from a distance, but too far off to prevent the execution of her purpose. She must have yielded herself up so readily to death—the young strong life had made no instinctive struggle when the cold waters closed around. There was a stronger in-

stinct still, that had made death as welcome as sleep to a tired child.

Arnold looked in the face of Dr. Hartree. There was no need for words. Just a wave of the hands, a lowering of the eyes, and all was told.

So the heiress had come to her home, and Margaret Stanton slept at last in her father's house.

John Wynde is now the master of the Oaks. Not even her sister's sacrifice could make Eleanor Stanton legitimate, or entitle her to her father's wealth. Not the less she is a hopeful, happy woman, proud of her husband, though he will never sit on either bench or woolsack—rejoicing in her children, though the surroundings of their infancy are so different from those of her own early life. Poverty has few trials for such a spirit as hers. Her husband may have an

uphill path to tread, but that will neither daunt him nor dishearten her. And he will never gain the summit of that hill—only, perhaps, some quiet resting-place half way, whence he may look back and thank God for having given him such a helper on the road.

Margaret Stanton does not sleep with her kindred in the vault under the old church at Summerly, but in the churchyard there is a fair white tombstone, which bears as an inscription, "Erected to her memory by her brother and sister, Arnold and Eleanor Ensdell, in loving remembrance."

And a tiny blossom, that faded at three months, their second child, sleeps with her.

But the fairest, brightest child that calls Eleanor mother—the one who for her very name is, perhaps, the best prized of all—is called Margaret.

THE END.

MESSRS. HURST AND BLACKETT'S LIST OF NEW WORKS.

SPIRITUAL WIVES. By W. HEPWORTH DIXON,

Author of 'New America,' &c. THIRD EDITION. 2 vols. 8vo.
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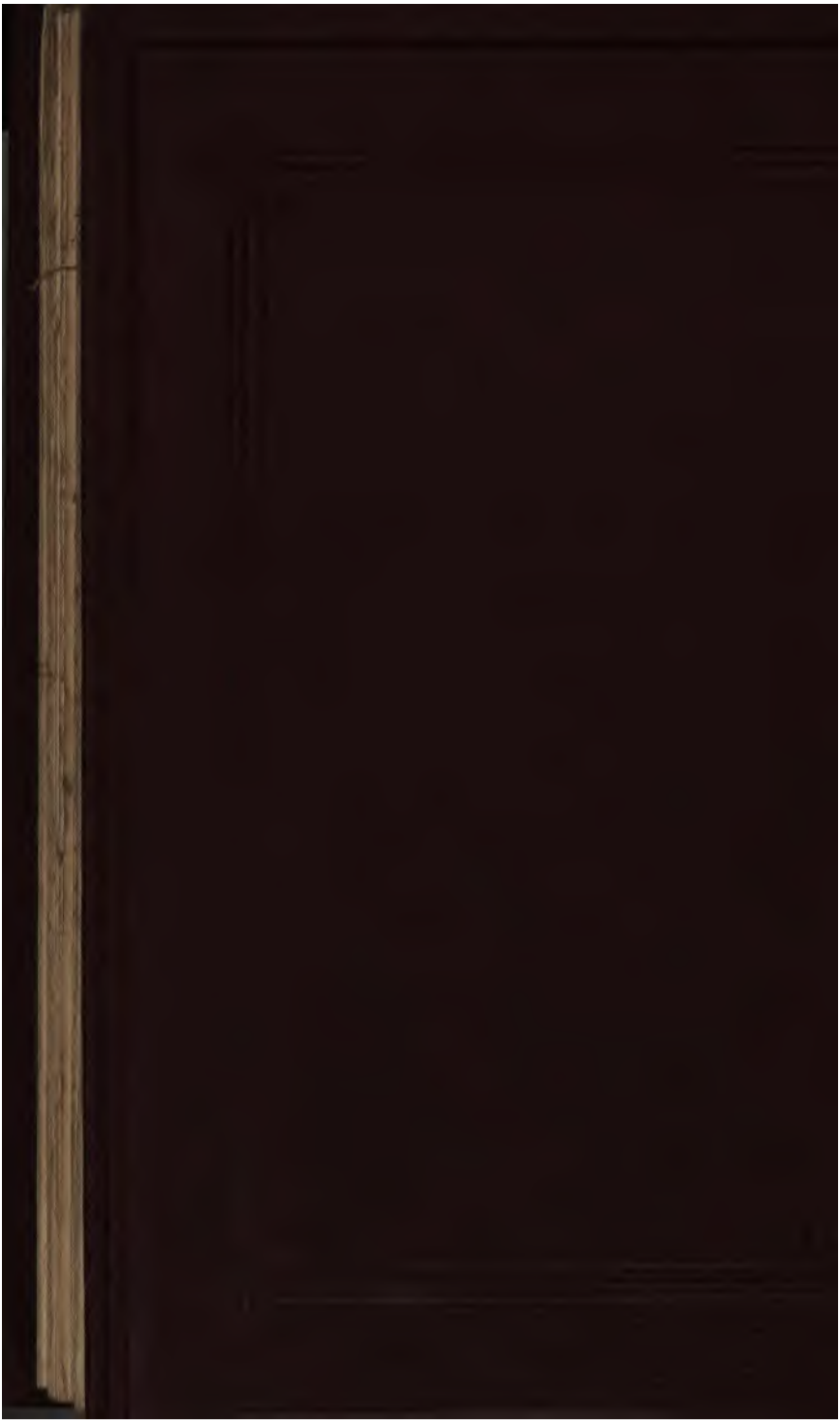
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